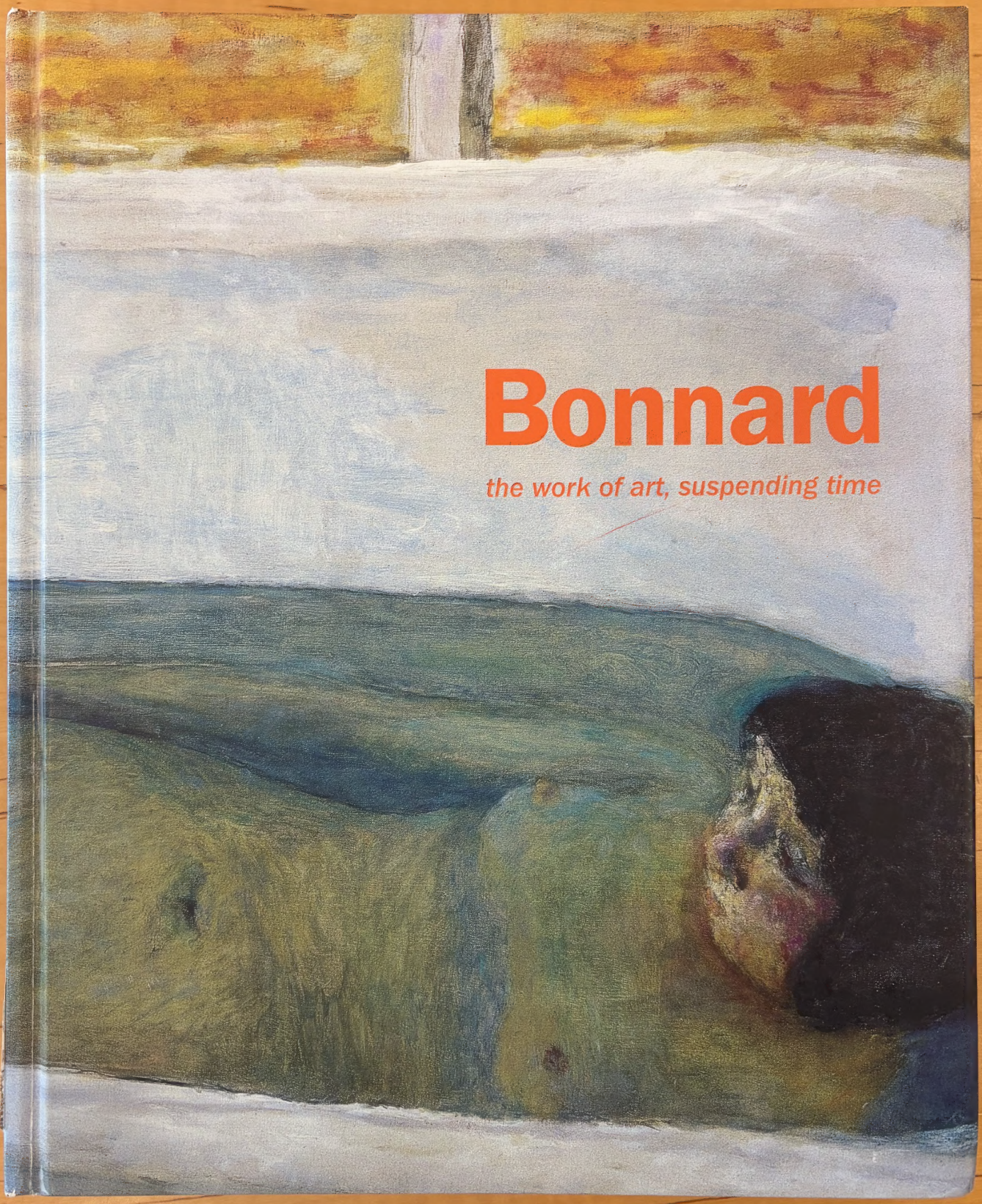
Bonnard
the work of art, suspending time

BONNARD PAINTING IN HIS STUDIO AT LE CANNET – Brassaï, 1946 - Centre Georges Pompidou – MNAM/CCI, Paris

BONNARD'S "PASSIVITY"

Yve-Alain Bois

To Denis Hollier

Picasso's diatribe against Bonnard, reported by Françoise Gilot, has long seemed properly stunning to me. Not that there need be the slightest doubt about it—on the contrary, his condemnation rings all the truer in that it is categorical (specialists now consider Gilot's book, whose publication met with protest from Picasso devotees, to be a particularly reliable account). I have often wondered how it is possible for an artist endowed with such visual intelligence to have been so blind? But that is to ask the wrong question, and to forget that negative criticism (provided it is explicit, and not mere invective) is often more acute than unconditional praise: those who reproached Cézanne for his inconsistencies during his lifetime were more perceptive, in a sense, than worshippers such as Maurice Denis, who confined the painter to a "French tradition" dating back to seventeenth-century classicism.

Picasso's two main critiques were closely linked (indeed practically identical on a certain level), but he did not realise as much—and this is what derailed his judgement. Had he perceived that the two characteristics he deplored in Bonnard's art formed a system and created a syntax, then Picasso might have begun to understand the reasons for his blindness, and might have said to himself—as he liked to say to those for whom his own painting was so much Chinese—"Chinese can be learned!" I would also find fault with Picasso on another point, namely his characterisation of everything he reproved in Bonnard's art as stemming from the artist's preoccupation with truthfulness to nature, although I would gladly grant him extenuating circumstances on this score, as responsibility for this particular cliché lies—if not with Bonnard himself—at least with his admirers, who did nothing but encourage it.

The first reproach concerns colour:

> When Bonnard paints a sky, perhaps he first paints it in blue, more or less the way it looks. Then he looks a little longer and sees some mauve in it, so he adds a touch or two of mauve, just to hedge. Then he decides that maybe it's a little pink too, so there's no reason not to add some pink. The result is a potpourri

> of indecision. If he looks long enough, he winds up adding a little yellow, instead of making up his mind what colour the sky really ought to be. Painting can't be done that way. Painting isn't a question of sensibility; it's a matter of seizing the power, taking over from nature, not expecting her to supply you with information and good advice.

This is followed by a defence of Matisse, an artist who demonstrated his ability to choose: if he opted for a red sky, all the other tones in the painting followed logically from that choice, and neither his sensibility nor reality had any say in the transposition of colours.

Picasso's second grievance concerns Bonnard's compositional style:

> ... the way he fills up the whole picture surface, to form a continuous field, with a kind of imperceptible quivering, touch by touch, centimetre by centimetre, but with a total absence of contrast. There's never a juxtaposition of black and white, of square and circle, sharp point and curve. It's an extremely orchestrated surface developed like an organic whole, but you never once get the clash of the cymbals which that kind of strong contrast provides.[1]

Picasso was clearly wrong on several points. He was mistaken in imagining, for example, that Bonnard elaborated his inimitable variegated patchworks of colour in front of the motif itself, progressively discerning shades of colour that had initially escaped him: in fact, Bonnard almost always painted from memory (not an original practice in itself, although he may have been the first painter for whom it was a determining factor, as we shall see). Moreover, the artist himself often referred (with some eloquence) to his discomfort in the presence of a model—any model[2]—which probably explains the overall mediocrity of his portraits (with the exception of the self-portraits, among the century's finest). It is tempting to attribute another of Picasso's ridiculous pronouncements—the alleged lack of contrast in Bonnard's paintings—to bad faith, for if the juxtaposition of black and white is rare in his later work (say, after World War I), the more intense juxtaposition of black and yellow is recurrent, not to mention the omnipresent complementary colour contrast which grew increasingly frequent over the years, as if Bonnard needed all the knowledge and experience accumulated in his later life to freely apply the Neo-Impressionist formulas he had deliberately rejected as overly academic in his youth. The reproach is equally unmerited at the morphological level: admittedly, few squares are confronted with circles in Bonnard's work, but to deny the importance of the straight/curve contrast in his painting is quite simply absurd. Many critics have noted the extent to which the deliquescence and formlessness of objects and figures in Bonnard's work are enhanced by their contrast with a highly rigid rectilinear framework. But bad faith it was not, and Picasso's blindness is that of everyone. Bonnard disturbs our vision as does Matisse, but in a different way, with different means and with different intentions.

1. Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso*, New York, Toronto, London, McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964, pp. 271-272.

2. On this point see, among others, Sarah Whitfield, "Fragments of an Identical World", in London, New York, 1998, p. 19-20.

With the art of both artists, our attention is so diffused that we perceive even the most violent contrasts only subliminally, but contrary to the post-1904 Matisse (i.e., subsequent to his brief "Vuillard period"), Bonnard compels us to take a long look at his paintings so that, little by little, once past the initial confusion, things and people slowly emerge before our eyes.[3] This delaying power is not within every artist's reach (and certainly not Picasso's). The key to it is both Bonnard's use of colour and the organised dispersion that characterises his mode of composition—which is practically "all-over" (to use the term famously coined by Clement Greenberg to describe the de-hierarchisation of Pollock's classic drip paintings). Or, to be more precise: colour and composition support each other in Bonnard's works to construct a dispersal into which our gaze is invited to get lost.

Picasso's diagnosis was correct, then, with a few reservations: Bonnard's paintings do indeed quiver imperceptibly, and there is no clash of cymbals to be heard. But what if such a racket was precisely what Bonnard sought to avoid, what if he detested the (decidedly macho) Romantic heroism of the artist who "seizes the power" and "takes over from nature"? By declaring that Bonnard was "not really a modern painter" (supposedly because he "obeys nature" and "doesn't transcend it"), and by calling him "decadent", Picasso revealed his own limits: he rejected gentle murmurs out of hand (down with Morandi, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin!), accepting only the brass section and the big bass drum in the orchestra of modernity.

The perspicacious reader may have noticed that in paraphrasing Picasso's diagnosis, I have omitted his reference to a "continuous field". Not that the notion is totally inappropriate—provided it is recognised that the continuity in question is an illusion, a clever trick. This is perhaps where Picasso most clearly reveals how little he studied Bonnard's work. Annoyed by what he interpreted in the French artist's paintings as banal and insipid petit-bourgeois sentimentality and cowardly abdication in the face of History, Picasso afforded them only a quick glance, seeing therein nothing other than decorative surface, and missing the image hidden in the carpet. Bonnard is not a painter for people in a hurry.

What happens when the eye grapples with a top quality Bonnard?[4] For example a landscape such as *The Garden* (1936-1938, cat. 77) or *Normandy Landscape* (1920, completed ca. 1926-1930, fig. p. 60 and cat. 46); or an interior scene in *contre-jour* overlooking a garden—one of his favourite themes, from the *Dining Room in the Country* (1913, cat. 34) to the dazzling *Studio with Mimosa* (1939-1946, cat. 88); or an urban scene such as *The Café* Au Petit Poucet, *Place Clichy* (1928, cat. 58)? Not to mention many still lifes, and even paintings which appear at first sight to be magnetised by the figure (like the whole series of "Nudes in the bath"): What happens to us in front of one or other of these works?

3. I have examined elsewhere Matisse's debt to Vuillard in 1904, i.e., just before he made another attempt at Signac's divisionist method (after his first abortive attempt in 1898-1899), and the extent to which Fauvism was the dialectical result of the Vuillard/Signac (or circulation/tension) contradiction, culminating in an expansionist aesthetic. See my essay entitled "On Matisse: The Blinding," in *October*, no. 68, Spring 1994, pp. 61-121. It could be said that Bonnard's later work also represents a synthesis of the methods of Vuillard (close hues, "decorative" excess, entropy and forced deceleration of perception, etc.) and of Signac (clash of complementary colours, simultaneous contrast, colour saturation). Working with an underlayer and using many half-tones rather than opting for an articulation of the surface with the flat colours used by Matisse (which entailed a reduction in the number of colours used), Bonnard remained true to the best of Vuillard's work (from the 1890s). It is colour saturation that radically distinguishes his painting from that of Vuillard. In all other respects—notably the way everything is intended to slow down perception of his paintings, forcing the viewer to take a long look—Bonnard remained faithful to Vuillard and thus to his own Nabi past.

4. At the risk of being struck by lightning, I'd say that this was by no means the majority of his output—he painted a great deal (far more than Matisse for example): over two thousand canvases many of which, in my opinion, would be better left in the storeroom. The uneven quality of his production is an enigma in itself. There were botched works even during his best years (the 1930s and 1940s). This still unresolved mystery has contributed to the ups and downs of his reputation and to arguments among critics concerning his work, even in his lifetime and all the more so since his death. On Bonnard's critical fortunes, see Philippe Le Leyzour, "Sur Bonnard, propos et critiques, 1943-1985", in Bordeaux, 1986.

First, we are hit full in the face: our perception is instantly saturated by an excess which makes us prey to the painting as an animal is both drawn to and paralysed by the light. This is the initial flash, before giddiness sets in: transfixed by a flood of contradictory information, we ourselves are the "potpourri of indecision". In want of benchmarks, we survey the painting from edge to edge, taking note as we do so of unusual goings-on in the peripheral areas. We look for a way in and think we have found one—now in a diagonal path beginning at the lower edge of the painting, now in a table top viewed from above and whose upright prow threatens to dominate the whole scene, now in the invitation of an angled mirror. We hope with all our might to reach the centre, which tempts us more often than not with a comforting void—a delusion, since this void offers no escape, the open window being nothing other than a colourful screen. It's like being on a diving board—the water shimmers tantalisingly below us, we could reach out and touch it, but we know that we cannot dive in. Instead of emerging from our initial state of catalepsy, we feel a creeping numbness, which becomes increasingly threatening the longer it lasts. The seconds, the minutes pass and we still don't know where to focus our gaze, looking constantly back and forth between the centre and the periphery—in a rhythm nicely dubbed "pulmonary" by John Elderfield—then making an (equally unsuccessful) attempt to encompass the whole surface.[5] We are unable to get our bearings, we cannot focus on a point which would establish the horizon from which the synthesis required by our visual apparatus could take effect.

With a burst of willpower, we rid ourselves of this phagocytosis in a conscious effort to analyse the painting. We gradually become aware of a phenomenon that was well described by David Sylvester (during a radio programme) with reference to a still life such as *The Table* (1925, Tate, London), but which seems to me to be even more radical in the landscapes (*Normandy Landscape* being one of the most striking examples):

> I find myself seeing the individual parts each as if in close-up, at a time, regardless [concerning the objects in a still life] of their position on the table and as if they had detached themselves from everything else. And, indeed, they are clearly designed to detach themselves. Every plate or dish or basket is an ellipse, a self-contained form, a form that is, so to speak, wrapped up in itself ... Each element is carefully, lovingly isolated, as a compact unit.[6]

This helps us understand our inability to synthesise, to find an "anchoring point" (to use Merleau-Ponty's expression): *all* the objects in the painting summon us, one after the other, enjoining us to grant them a generative role to the detriment of all the others. The immediate impression of excess stems less from profusion (some paintings are not particularly crowded) than from the fact that no figure is subject to a dominant rule. Bonnard's idea of "working on one fragment while hiding the rest" suddenly makes sense.[7] Yet we should not suppose

5. John Elderfield, "Seeing Bonnard", in London, New York, 1998, p. 40. John Elderfield distinguishes three successive movements of the viewer's gaze before a Bonnard painting, and seems to identify these with the repetitive movements proper to visual perception in general: the to-and-fro between centre and periphery, global *scanning* ("*across and around the surface*") and partial *scanning*, confined to certain parts of the surface (p. 41). My subsequent remarks concerning the manipulations of the underlayer in Bonnard's work go some way to explaining these partial *scannings*.

6. David Sylvester, "Still Life: Cézanne, Braque, Bonnard (1961-62)", reproduced in *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948-1997*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1997, pp. 106-107.

7. "Notes de Bonnard", published by Jean Leymarie in Saint-Paul, 1975, p. 32

his world to be purely paratactic—objects are not just placed next to each other, it's not as though they don't interact with each other and with their surroundings. But these relationships (mostly based on colour contrasts) are tenuous, provisional, friable, fragile attempts at dialogue that never come to anything.

The most persistent among us decide to take the analysis further. Two movements are possible at this stage: a forward movement, to study the surface close up (as if we were short-sighted), or a backward one for a distant (long-sighted) view. This may be a question of personal preference—I've always delighted in close-up observation of paintings, even those that demand distance, even large-format paintings—but it seems to me that Bonnard encourages proximity in this second phase, wanting the viewer to inhale the smell of turpentine, to breathe in his concoctions of paint. Why else would he have so cherished the *intimiste* viewpoint that so many observers noticed in his work even at the outset of his career? In *Intimacy* (1891, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), for example, a hand holding a clay pipe emerges from the bottom of the canvas; this hand obviously belongs to the painter, whose body is otherwise absent from the composition (the whole scene undoubtedly a mirror-reflection). We are required to mentally inhabit this hand, to smoke this pipe in Bonnard's place. We are enticed to approach by a whole range of pictorial tricks inherited from other artists. These include Degas and even Caillebotte in the still lifes or secluded interiors (perspective foreshortening, plunging view, dramatic framing, catoptric manipulation); and in the landscapes Courbet (suppression of the sky) and Cézanne (fusion of near and far, notably through the inversion of the colour register prescribed by atmospheric perspective). Once up close, we find ourselves dissecting the pictorial matter, wanting to know "how it's done".

A first surprise is in store: nothing could be less homogeneous than Bonnard's touch, nor more varied than the texture within the same painting—a thick layer of golden yellow is juxtaposed with a juice of limpid violet; an outline in thick paste straight from the tube is continued by a thin unpainted contour; energetic brushstrokes with well defined edges end in a blurry mist rubbed on with the fingers; sometimes a dry brush has scraped the grain of the canvas, sometimes a brush loaded with oil paint has swept smoothly across it. There is only one constant: mattness.[8] Another feature, which is frequent but not systematic, is that Bonnard rarely mixed his colours on the canvas, almost always waiting for one layer to dry before adding another. Moreover—and in this he differed as much from Monet as from Seurat or Cézanne—the direction of his strokes very often followed the objects and figures depicted, thereby highlighting the separatedness of the latter, as Sylvester has noted.[9] This heterogeneous surface comes in conjunction with a highly complex geology. Bonnard liked to quote the following remark made by a house painter: "Sir, the first layer of paint is always fine, let's see how you get on with the second";[10] in my opinion, Bonnard often bids us to see how he got on with the tenth or the

8. Bonnard disapproved of the use of varnish, which was always disastrous on his canvases, as it was on those of Vuillard. Andrea Kirsh and Rustin S. Levenson indicate that on the back of *The Bathroom Mirror* (1908, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), the artist took the precaution of writing: "*n'est pas de vernis - P. B.*" (*Seeing Through Paintings: Physical Examinations in Art Historical Studies*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 227).
Critics have often associated the mattness of Bonnard's paintings with that of Puvis de Chavannes, who was a model for the Nabis, but this is a red herring in my opinion. The origin of Bonnard's preference for a matt finish is more likely to be found in his work as a set designer, thanks to which he learned (like Vuillard) to use distemper, the distinctive feature of which is that it dries quickly and absorbs rather than refracts light. On this aspect in Vuillard's work, see Nancy Forgione's thesis, *Edouard Vuillard in the 1890s: Intimism, Theater and Decoration*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University, 1992, *passim* and especially pp. 205-206.
See also Jacques Salomon, "Vuillard's Technique", in John Russell, *Edouard Vuillard 1868-1940*, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1971, pp. 137-140.

9. A passage previously omitted from the quotation of David Sylvester's remarks concerning *The Table* (1925): "There is very little overlapping or touching of these ellipses: most of them are isolated, framed by the tablecloth. And the brushstrokes follow the form of each ellipse, and this emphasis on their self-containment is reinforced by the fact that the brushstrokes of the tablecloth at the periphery of some of the ellipses also follow their form, making a sort of aura around them." (*op. cit.*, see note 6).

10. Pierre Bonnard, anthology of quotations in a special issue of *Verve*, August 1947.

hundredth. We know that it took him months, sometimes years, to finish his paintings, and that he liked to rework his canvases even long after parting with them (sometimes without their happy owners knowing about this). His works were the result of slow sedimentation.

It's no secret that the extraordinary opulence of colour in Bonnard's finest paintings is largely due to the action of the underlayer (and often of a series of underlayers). Few critics, however, have noted his indebtedness in this respect to Seurat's studies for *La Grande Jatte*.[11] With our nose against the canvas—in the painter's place, as it were[12]—we can verify our first intuition: the not-quite-crimson that we could not situate on the chromatic scale is actually secretly activated by a light vermilion underneath; the apple green stands out over a violet wash; the brown energises the orange that it covers. Every time we hesitate in front of a patch of colour, every time our linguistic arsenal is insufficient to describe a jasper hue, we find ourselves, when peering closely, faced with the Grail which Seurat and the troop of Neo-Impressionists that followed after him had sought—and largely failed—to attain: namely an optical blending, a fusion of tones this time no longer juxtaposed, but superimposed. It must be added that this is not the traditional transparency of glazes (even though Bonnard very often obtained an effect of transparency, notably through his preferential use of close hues). The opaqueness of the pictorial matter was essential to him, particularly for the final touches or layers—which is why he preferred gouache to watercolour for so long, and when he used the latter, it was most often enhanced by the former.[13]

Yet our deliberate short-sightedness leads to a surprise, which completes —and somewhat corrects—the explanation of the phenomenon described by Sylvester: the first layer of a painting by Bonnard is like a jigsaw in which giant pieces fit edge to edge. The metaphor of the politico-geographical map now seems more appropriate than that of geology: the surface in question is broken up into zones of influence, each with its own dominant colour. These zones can sometimes be coextensive with a single object—the area intended for a wicker basket full of fruit was first covered in reddish brown; the one intended for the oval of its shadow, in greenish-yellow; the space now covered by a tree was first rubbed with blue. Sometimes, on the other hand, these zones weld neighbouring motifs together, such as when a peripheral figure is enjoined to play the chameleon and camouflage itself to blend with its surroundings, as Elderfield has noted. Such is the case with the spectral figure of Marthe, which we only manage to make out after a while and with much effort, in many backlit views in which a window opens onto a garden. And sometimes—more often than one might suppose—these subterranean zones are demarcated irrespectively of the motif: the coloured boundaries of the underlayer (geological faults that only come to light on close inspection) cut through a door, a wall or bathroom tiles—all continuous surfaces in reality, but which come apart in their representation because of the substratum of underlaying colour and the variegated spread of the fire it kindles.

11. Pierre Courthion would appear to be an exception in this respect, with his 1945 monograph (p. 68). Whatever Michel Terrasse's views on the matter, the only painter to equal Bonnard in his use of the underlayer is Mark Rothko, as demonstrated to such dazzling effect in the "Bonnard and Rothko: Color and Light" exhibition curated by Bernice Rose at the Pace Gallery, New York, in 1997. Despite the quality of his critical perception of Bonnard's paintings, Michel Terrasse refuses to envisage any comparison between his work and that of the American abstract painters: "To indulge in such extrapolations is to confuse the essence with the void", he wrote in *Bonnard: du dessin au tableau* (1996, p. 265), apparently in response to Jean Clair's remarks alluding (in disparagement, incidentally) to Sam Francis, Morris Louis, and Jules Olitski (see Jean Clair, "*Les aventures du nerf optique*" in Paris, Washington, Dalla, 1984, pp. 32-34).

12. Pierre Bonnard: "The work is done with one's nose against the canvas or paper." This remark is followed by another (which I shall return to later) concerning the need to be aware in advance of the effect of lines and colours in the painting when viewed from a distance (Saint-Paul, 1975, p. 26).

13. On this point, see Antoine Terrasse, 1967, p. 153 (with the painter's reported remarks against the technique of watercolour, especially the need to allow the white of the paper to show through). Hedy Hahnloser-Bühler (widow of the greatest collector of Bonnard's work during the artist's lifetime) recounts in her memoirs how her husband urged the painter on his hospital bed to return to watercolour to take his mind off things: "What a disappointment for us! You couldn't see anything but a sort of brownish sauce because, as Spitteler says, 'if you keep mixing everything, you get nothing but grey'. Because he worked with oil paint, Bonnard was used to reworking and correcting his paintings, and explained as best he could that he was not good at first sketches. 'Manet can do that', he said, 'but I don't have that gift'. Luckily, the Doctor—my husband—had a fortuitous intuition: he took him some gouache" (quoted in Annette Vaillant, 1965, p. 184).

The following remark made by Bonnard to Tériade is often quoted: "A painting is a series of patches that unite to form the object, the area over which the eye travels without a hitch."[14] Did Bonnard really believe in this end result: the formation of an object, solid and smooth under our gaze? I'm not entirely sure, even though he is supposed to have told Pierre Courthion that there should "not be any holes" in a picture.[15] The painter's admirers were quick to note the multiple viewpoints that jostle together in his paintings, a phenomenon that they often associated with Bonnard's famous words to his nephew Charles Terrasse:

> The eye of the painter gives human value to objects, reproduces things as a human eye sees them.
> And this vision is *mobile.*
> And this vision is *variable.*
> I stand in the corner of the room, near this sun-drenched table. The eye sees distant masses as having an almost linear aspect, without relief, without depth. But near objects rise towards it. The sides trail away. And these vanishing trails are sometimes rectilinear—for what is distant—sometimes curved—for planes that are near. The vision of distant things is a flat vision. It is the near planes that give the idea of the universe as the human eye sees it, of a universe that is undulating, or convex, or concave.[16]

This text is generally quoted by those who see Bonnard as a super-realist who used his harmonies of colour and variable perspectives to represent the world as we really see it—and not only as we see it, but also as we experience it with all our senses. This thesis is developed by Jean Clair and further investigated by John Elderfield. I shall return to this argument, which supposes not only that the painter's principal intention was to reproduce on canvas an image captured on the retina, but also that one could do so (a supposition at the basis of the old debate about curvilinear perspective, to which Bonnard seems to refer here). For the moment I'd like to concentrate on the opposition Bonnard draws between the vision of near and far planes, and to understand how this distinction can be applied not to the motif represented, but to the painting-object. So let's move on to the view from a distance.

Perhaps the most surprising advice that Bonnard gave to himself was to submit his paintings to the test of distance. Indeed, in a series of notes published by Jean Leymarie, he seems obsessive on this point: "To judge yourself, place the canvas on the ground, against a wall in the open air, 10 metres away," he said, adding elsewhere that it "is necessary to know *in advance* the effect of the lines, of the volumes, of the colours that will be seen from a distance, and what kind of power will remain". Reducing the experimental threshold of this "distance test" by half, he wrote: "In an average painting, the change occurs from about 5 metres."[17] What did he hope for by standing at a distance (which can't have been very easy

14. Pierre Bonnard, remark made to Tériade (1942), in *Verve*, *op. cit.*,

15. This remark by Pierre Bonnard, reported by Pierre Courthion in *L'Art indépendant: panorama international de 1900 à nos jours (1958)*, is quoted by John Elderfield (*op. cit.*, note 31). This may be an idea dating back to the Nabi period or borrowed from Matisse (on this point, see "On Matisse: The Blinding", *op. cit.*, p. 62). Bonnard is truer to himself, I think, when he declares that "to begin a painting, there has to be an empty space in the middle" (remark reported by Hans R. Hahnloser, in Annette Vaillant, *op. cit.*, p. 165).

16. Quoted in Charles Terrasse, 1927, pp. 163-164. Charles Terrasse notes earlier in his book that multiple viewpoints featured in Bonnard's work as early as the Nabi period: in *The Checked Blouse* (1892, Musée d'Orsay) for example, the table is shown from above but the figure is frontal (p. 34). Also worthy of interest is the following handwritten note by Bonnard: "Judgement of the eyes/ different/walking, standing, sitting" (quoted in "Observations sur la peinture", notes published in Paris, Washington, Dallas, 1984., p. 180).

17. Saint-Paul, 1975, pp. 32, 26, 27. Several other remarks on the same theme.

in what Leymarie called his "minuscule overhanging studio" at Le Cannet)?[18] Contrary to what one might suppose, he was not trying to get an overall view or perceive a compositional coherence from a distance: what he wanted to detect and correct were too disturbing breaks in the intensity of colour. Indeed, what cements the autonomous, differentiated zones of his paintings (while preventing the viewer from privileging one over another), what gives the impression that the whole painting is plunged into the same liquid environment, is the fact that contrasting colour temperatures (of equal intensity) are substituted for traditional value contrasts.[19]

On the assumption that Bonnard put his theories into practice, the observation of a painting from a distance enabled him to ensure that it partook to the "democracy of colour" that underpinned his pictorial undertaking, the aim of which was to destabilise—to lead us viewers astray in the substance of a world we thought we knew but which turns out to be totally foreign to us. He had no interest in subjecting his painting to the kind of vision he characterises as "flat", "without relief, without depth", and disengaged (not "human") when speaking of the perception of distant vistas. A number of critics—notably Sarah Whitfield, David Sylvester and, to a lesser degree, John Elderfield—seem to consider that the dispersed and floating objects in a Bonnard painting fuse together when viewed from a distance, finding their spatial foundation and finally congealing into a picture, as it were, which grants us a place to occupy, frees us from our initial doubts, and helps us out of the labyrinth into which we had locked ourselves by wanting to take too close a look.[20]

Two recent experiences have left me doubting this thesis. The first concerns the aforementioned *Normandy Landscape*. In the Smith College Museum of Art, it is hung in such a way that a close view is impossible (the viewer being separated from the work by an architectural void of two floors and protected from this abyss by a glass guardrail). This compulsory distance, far from attenuating the dislocation of the various elements, makes it all the more striking: the path that climbs through the field of flowers; the trees, which are almost as differentiated as in a Henri Rousseau painting (including a vertical slash of apple green with a halo of white dots which one would be tempted to interpret as a poplar if the colour weren't so delicate); the dark branch that emerges like an airship from the upper left corner; the enigmatic shadows (very De Chirico); the white ghost of the house on the left, topped by the snowy ball of an apple tree in bloom; and the fluffy sky—here blue and white, there white and yellow. There is nothing realistic—nor even impressionistic—in this landscape, which evokes Odilon Redon (whom Bonnard greatly admired) more than any other artist (except perhaps Soutine, for the dramatic dislocation of its parts).
The other painting that finally rid me of any lingering inclination to synthesize via distance is a still life from 1936, *Basket of Fruit*, at the Fogg Museum in Cambridge, MA (Dauberville, no. 1547, fig. p. 61). I had ample opportunity

18. Jean Leymarie, in Saint-Paul, 1975, p. 12. Bonnard's predilection for confined studios seems to have dated back to his youth. According to Timothy Hyman, the studio he shared with Vuillard and Maurice Denis in 1891 was "as big as a handkerchief". See Timothy Hyman, 1998 (London), 2000 (Paris), p. 29.
19. It was through the discovery of Japanese prints during his Nabi years that Bonnard learned the art of replacing values with colour alone: "I'd understood in contact with these crude popular images that colour could ... express everything with no need of relief or modelling. I realised it was possible to translate light, form and character with nothing but colour, without resorting to values" (remarks reported by Antoine Terrasse, *op. cit.*, p. 10). It was also by working on his own lithographs that Bonnard consolidated his skill as a colourist: "When you have to study relationships between hues, using only four or five colours that you superimpose or bring together, you discover a lot of things" (remark made to André Suarès, quoted by Antoine Terrasse, *ibid.*, p. 44). It is therefore interesting to observe Bonnard's distinctive use of colour superimposition in his lithographs: he modulated his colours with matching tones. So, as Timothy Hyman remarks, he used five different colours in *Street at Evening in the Rain* from1899 (Bouvet, no. 68), but we can only distinguish three, because three of them are very similar browns and blacks contrasting with the dominant grey-green and the touches of yellow (Timothy Hyman, *op. cit.*, p. 50).
20. Sarah Whitfield, *op. cit.*, p. 26; David Sylvester, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106; John Elderfield, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
21. Pierre Bonnard, anthology in *Verve*, *op. cit.*
22. Sarah Whitfield, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
23. Sarah Whitfield has noted a good number of these incongruous objects (*op. cit.*, p. 14), the most curious of which is perhaps the form leaving the frame on the right in *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden* (1930-1931, cat. 54). Another equally enigmatic example can be seen in the *Large Yellow Nude* of 1931: the shapeless object (traditionally described as a bathrobe thrown over a chair) quickly sketched in red in the foreground against the white of the reserved background (this reserved area is a very rare phenomenon in Bonnard's work, which would tend to indicate that the painting, although signed, was unfinished). This object is held out from the lower left edge of the painting by two purple tongues, which American artist Eric Fischl has recently chosen to interpret as the hands of the artist, holding up a towel for his wife. In a very interesting essay published shortly after World War II, André Lhote noted: "There are landscapes by Bonnard and even still lifes in front of which one hesitates for a moment, unable at first glance to discern the orientation of the composition, the top and the bottom ... He systematically distorts the relationships between values and dimensions, letting tiny indications proliferate in his memory, and major elements fade. It is as if, after a lapse of time, his memories have so evolved that they show him an inverted world. Hence these fantastic constructions, these clouds in the foreground, these trees with hair ..." (*Formes et couleurs*, 1944, p 4).

to examine this painting during the many years I spent at Harvard (my earlier remarks about the underlayer being split into different coloured zones are largely the result of this familiarity). The same thing would happen every time: Trying to work out what the orange-edged black area right in the middle of the composition might possibly be, or the strange green creature with brown "hair" perceptible behind the handle, or many another incongruous detail, I would step back—but I always ended up admitting defeat. The bluish green tongue dangling on the right usually took shape fairly quickly as an artichoke leaf, but as for the rest... No matter how hard I tried, distance never made it possible for this composition to crystallise into anything other than the dream-like image of a cornucopia with hazy contents, floating on a stormy sea (the tablecloth, divided into at least four "zones of influence") towards a vague horizon of incandescent rectangles (chair, wall, fireplace?).

Although I don't hold with the idea of Bonnard as a "painter of the real", there is one respect in which he might at first glance deserve the title—namely, his ability to casually incorporate into his paintings, without highlighting them, anomalies perceived in the spectacle of the world, pockets of nonsense that are presented to our view. The following is one of the notes he submitted to Tériade for inclusion in the special issue of *Verve* devoted to him (and published, sadly, shortly after his death): "The improbable is often the truth itself."[21] As Sarah Whitfield points out, Bonnard "paints objects as though he has no prior knowledge of their forms".[22] She links this rejection of cognitive preconceptions to the frequent appearance of enigmatic objects in his paintings (such as the green vegetable-face with hair in *Basket of Fruit*) and to the spatial incoherence of which he seems to have been so fond.[23] We could also attribute the preponderant role of the mirror as a destabilising agent in Bonnard's work (mentioned by the best critics)[24] to his taste for the improbable-but-true. We should not, however, suppose this to stem from a desire for heightened realism: on the contrary, the disautomation of perception—referred to by the Russian Formalists as *ostranenie*—requires considerable effort.[25] Thadée Nathanson, co-founder of *La Revue blanche*, often stressed Bonnard's rapidity: he was a fast walker and even faster sketcher of little scenes of Parisian life (which brought him early fame). He made hasty notes in his pocket diaries during country walks and dashed through museums. In his studio, he constantly flitted from one canvas to the next—even though it took him several months to finish a single one.[26] But such speed, surprising in an artist whose every painting compels the viewer to take a slow look, had nothing of the absent-mindedness of a man in a hurry. If he seemed distracted, it was because, as Antoine Terrasse noted, he was "singularly attentive".[27] Jean Clair refers to "floating attention"—a psychoanalytical phrase, as we know.[28] This seems quite accurate to me: Bonnard's floating attention alights on visual hiccups as the analyst's does on verbal ones, his painter's awareness is alert to gaps in the continuum offered to perception by the spectacle of the world, as the analyst's is to slips of the tongue.
This psychoanalytical metaphor provides a good springboard for approaching

24. On this point, I have nothing much to add to previous remarks by critics such as Timothy Hyman (*op. cit.*, pp. 89-92), Sarah Whitfield (*op. cit.*, p. 16) and Jean Clair (*op. cit.*, p. 25), except that Bonnard may have borrowed from Caillebotte this (extremely destabilising) *trick* of making the whole (or almost the whole) painting a reflection in a mirror (whose frame is sometimes practically aligned with the edges of the painting). On this aspect of Caillebotte's art, see Michael Fried, "Caillebotte's Impressionism", in *Representations*, no. 66, spring 1999, p. 36f. Finally, a word about *The Café Au Petit Poucet Place Clichy*, as it provides an excellent example of such destabilisation: everyone agrees that the right two-thirds of this painting show the café terrace and passersby in the street as the reflection in a mirror whose frame is hidden by a pillar, to the left of which we see the women seated at tables inside the café. This interpretation is based on the inversion of the inscription (the name of the café) on the awning over the terrace. Yet such inscriptions, which serve to signal cafés, are generally visible the right way round from the street (and the wrong way round from the terrace). If this was the case with the awning of the *Petit Poucet*, a realistic representation of the scene would have required the reverse inscription reflected in a mirror to be "put right". In short, Bonnard produces doubt: we no longer know what is reflection and what is not—once again, we don't know where we stand.
25. It was Picasso's cubism that provided the Russian Formalists with the finest example of "*ostranenie*" (on this point, see my essay, "The Semiology of Cubism", in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1992, pp. 169–208). It goes without saying that Bonnard's defamiliarisation does not follow the semiological model. Lhote's observation regarding an "inverted world" (see note 23) which could be interpreted in a symbolist sense (by referring to the fantasizing of Odilon Redon, for example) seems to me to be equally well suited to a phenomenological interpretation of Bonnard. I'm thinking in particular of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's extraordinary pages on what happens when we see a face in reverse ("To reverse an object is to remove its signification from it", as he wrote in *La Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 292). See also the other passage in which Merleau-Ponty describes how difficult it is, when walking along an avenue, "to see the spaces between the trees as things and the trees themselves as background" (*ibid.*, p. 305). Bonnard's painting forces us into perilous exercises of this nature.
26. Thadée Nathanson, 1948, pp. 316-17.
27. Antoine Terrasse, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
28. Jean Clair, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

a common theme of the Bonnard literature: the theme of memory. The analyst—alerted by slips of the tongue to buried memories that may be attempting to bury themselves still deeper—endeavours to unearth them. As for Bonnard, he took an interest in visual hiccups because they seemed to him to be the best approximation of images as the memory stores and restores them: fragmentary, discontinuous, with ill-defined edges, of irregular clarity. The best critics of his work have all stressed the importance of memory for Bonnard, and many have (rightly) compared him to Proust.

Strangely enough, those who see Bonnard as a super-realist have dealt with this issue best. Referring to the slowness of perception to which the viewer is constrained by a Bonnard painting—the fact that its many hidden treasures are only discovered little by little (Marthe-the-chameleon simply being the most obvious example)—Sylvester suggests the splendid metaphor of waking in the morning, when we see a vague form in front of us that "gradually acquires more and more substance, more clarity of definition and more overtones of meaning".[29] This, however, is merely a transposition of Bonnard's famous remark that he wanted to "show what one sees when one enters a room all of a sudden", a remark that Elderfield investigates at length with the aid of many recent treatises on psychology and the physiology of vision[30]: the momentary early-morning confusion before we gather our wits, or when we suddenly enter an unfamiliar room, is compared to the loss of identity and the giddiness that we initially experience in front of a Bonnard painting. Both images are judicious in that they imply a delay in the visual perception, and a duration, but they are inaccurate in my view in that they suggest that the initial confusion is followed by resolution, that the "real" gradually solidifies, and that paralysis and doubt give way to restorative clarity.

While both Sylvester and Elderfield appear to think that the scene represented in a Bonnard painting ends up by congealing when viewed from a distance—an opinion I cannot share—they admit nonetheless that the close-up view of his paintings (which the painter seems to encourage) offers the viewer neither unity of time nor of place. The flexible register of memory allows them to connect this infinite flottation to the realist thesis.

Sylvester is the more eloquent on this point; Elderfield, the more precise.

There are several qualities in the paintings themselves which suggest remembered rather than actual images. There is an atmosphere of withdrawal and reverie. There is a sense that the intensity of the objects—the passionate tenderness felt for objects—is not matched by the density of the objects themselves, which are wraithlike, weightless. There is a feeling that the scene laid out is infinitely precious as only cherished memories can be precious. All of this adds up to the interpretation that Bonnard was painting in order to recapture, to recover, moments of perfect pleasure lived a long time ago. And yet on the other hand he could be painting from memory something seen in the dining-room just before he came into the studio, and investing it with a feeling of the transcience

29. David Sylvester, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

30. John Elderfield, *op. cit.*, p. 37f. Bonnard's remark is quoted by Jean Clair (*op. cit.*, p. 19), who claims to have taken it from the painter's notes, "*Observations sur la peinture*", published in the same catalogue (1984) in which, however, it does not feature. The original source seems to be the monograph by Antoine Terrasse (*op. cit.*, p. 179).

PAYSAGE DE NORMANDIE – *Normandy Landscape*
1920, finished ca. 1926-1930 (cat. 46)

of pleasurable things and of the transcience of life itself—a feeling that could account for the nostalgic and evanescent character of the work.[31] (Sylvester)

Bonnard paints from memory paintings that, representing perception, represent the creation of memory.[32] (Elderfield)

And, comparing Bonnard to Matisse:

Matisse extracts something memorable from momentary perception and offers it to the mind; Bonnard remembers extracting something memorable and offers that to the mind.[33]

We have plenty of Bonnard's statements on the subject of memory. They generally begin with a comment on the reluctance—sometimes even the disgust—he felt in the presence of the object to be painted (exemplified by his categorical rejection of the open-air painting dear to the Impressionists, or the fact that he painted Marthe her whole life long as the young woman she had been when they first met), and end with the priority he accorded to first impressions and his fear of forgetting them:

The presence of the object, of the motif, is a great nuisance to the painter at the time of painting. Since the starting point for a painting is an idea—if the object is there at the time of working, the artist always runs the risk of getting caught up in the effects of direct, immediate vision and of losing the initial idea along the way.[34]

PANIER DE FRUITS – *Still Life: Basket of Fruit*
1936 - Oil on canvas - 69,8 x 34,9 cm
Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge (Massachusetts)

Or:

Through seduction, or the first idea, the painter attains the universal. It is seduction which determines the choice of motif and corresponds exactly to the painting. If this seduction, this initial idea fades away, all that remains is the motif, the object that invades and dominates the painter. From that time on, he no longer produces his own painting. With some painters—such as Titian—the seduction is so powerful that it never leaves them, even if they remain in direct contact with the object for a long time. But as for me, I'm very weak, it's hard for me to control myself in front of the object.[35]

As Elderfield pointed out, this attitude could hardly be more different from that of Matisse, who always required close, knee-to-knee contact with his model. Bonnard's obsession with memory also explains that, unlike Matisse, he was able to retouch his paintings without needing to rework them entirely, and that he never wanted to decide on their format in advance (which is why he did not mount his canvases on stretchers before painting them), reserving the possibility of changing dimensions and proportions during the course of his work (a mem-

31. David Sylvester, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-110. See also the fine pages devoted by Sarah Whitfield to decrepitude in Bonnard's work, his interest in faded flowers, in overripe or even rotten fruit, his representation of Marthe as if dead in her bath (*op. cit.*, pp. 28-29).
32. John Elderfield, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
34. Pierre Bonnard, "Propos recueillis en 1943 par Angèle Lamotte", *Verve*, *op. cit.*
35. *Ibid.*

ory is a projected image, its scale does not need to be predetermined). It also explains the speed of Bonnard's preparatory sketches (to which I referred earlier), and his admiration for the dazzling pen strokes of Delacroix: "The important thing is to remember what struck you and to note it down as quickly as possible... The important thing is to never let go until you've managed to recreate that first impression."[36]

Why such a fixation on something that is so inevitably unattainable, irrecoverable? In this respect, it seems to me that Bonnard was mistaken in supposing that the first impression—the seduction—was a matter of choice. It would be truer to say that it came crashing down on him, without his being able to control it in the slightest. And if he felt weak in the presence of the model, it was because he no longer had a means of escape, because he had to make a choice. Picasso said of Bonnard that he didn't "know how to choose"; he should have said that he didn't *want* to.[37]

It's not so easy to opt for non-choice; it's not so easy to turn passivity into a virtue in one's painting, to make it the mainspring of one's art, and to have that art manifest it, so that even the viewer perceives it and gauges the risk it represents. Bonnard often complained of his lack of energy and willpower.[38] The fact is that he lived a solitary, monastic, and highly regulated life. His fiercest critics—notably Zervos, in a famous article that enraged Matisse—accused him of impotence.[39] Bonnard was wrong to complain, as were the critics to grumble, because it was his very acceptance of passivity as a condition of his art that allowed him to make what was perhaps his boldest challenge to the concept of man as bequeathed by the philosophy of consciousness since Descartes, and to unknowingly embark on a phenomenological project. Paradoxically, it was thanks to his passivity in the world, his refusal to choose or to heed the injunctions of his conscious mind, that Bonnard managed to involve the viewer's body in his paintings, to appeal to the whole body, to refer us back to a pre-objective, pre-symbolic world that we do our best to forget. Let it be said in passing, it is a shame that the philosopher Merleau-Ponty—who took such an interest in passivity and to whom we owe such precious pages on Cézanne—did not investigate Bonnard's case. He even devoted a course to this very subject, passivity, in which the passage concerning memory (and Proust) would have merited a Bonnardian excursus. When I read the following, for example, "To remember something is to remember the way in which one acceded to that something. And this, as we have seen, is through the body, so it is to remember a certain mode of being of the body,"[40] I think of Bonnard and of the notes on the weather that featured, like so many reminders, next to the daily sketches in his pocket diary for years on end.[41]

The importance of childhood in Bonnard's world has often been discussed (all those intimate photos of naked children splashing around in a makeshift pool!). As Nicholas Watkins has noted, Bonnard mythologised his own childhood; at

36. Pierre Bonnard, remarks reported by Ingrid Rydbeck (1937), quoted by Gilles Genty, in Gilles Genty et Pierrette Vernon, 2003, p. 164.

37. In an interesting text whose militant tone is difficult to understand today (the stakes being forgotten), Jean Bazaine introduces Bonnard's art as follows (after pointing out that "the space between two trees" is also an object): "In the face of the thousand mingled realities which struggle, impinge on each other and are superposed, in the presence of so many disordered items, the painter does not have to *choose*. Let's abandon once and for all the cliché of art as beginning with a choice. The painter doesn't blink in the face of nature. He takes it all, then attempts to find the yeast which will make this soft dough rise, and give it a form and a destiny" (*Formes et couleurs*, *op. cit.*, p. 39).

38. Thadée Nathanson, 1951, pp. 51 and 99.

39. Christian Zervos, *Cahiers d'art*, 1947, pp. 1-6. A facsimile of the first page of the article, riddled with furious annotations by Matisse, was published by Jean Clair in *Bonnard-Matisse Correspondance*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 132.
See also this pearl from Gary Indiana, in an account of the retrospective exhibition at Beaubourg which otherwise contained some judicious remarks: "In this microcosm of invariable things and easily controlled emotional moments, desire must have been nailed to the ground, rendered impotent, assigned to creatures whose enforced passivity displays all the 'natural' beauty of bovines hardly capable of feeling" ("The Seduction of Pierre Bonnard", *Art in America*, September 1984, p. 173).

40. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution, la passivité: Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)*, Paris, Belin, 2003, p. 253.

41. On this strange habit of Bonnard's with its implied love of everyday banality, see the passage devoted to the subject by Jean Clair (*op. cit.*, pp. 17-18), in which he pertinently evokes the "revenge of meteorology over chronology".

the end of his life, he published a facsimile edition of his own handwritten letters to his grandmother.[42] And in many paintings from a certain period (prior to the one that interests us here) he placed a child in the visual field, like a witness to his experience—almost like a substitute, justifying the childish awkwardness he sometimes imparted to his art.[43] Although such a fixation on childhood is obviously part of the nostalgia to which Sylvester refers, it is more in the nature of a constantly actualised identification than the memory of a vanished world: the child is he (or she) who perceives without yet knowing, for whom everything is "first impression" (such is the myth, at any rate, and a modernist cliché if ever there was one). Yet Bonnard was just as empathetic with an even less verbal creature, as Léon Werth suggested in this remark quoted by Elderfield: "Bonnard looks at the world the same way that a young animal or an infant move their eyes about. He witnesses the sudden and miraculous birth of objects and characters."[44] More than simply studying animals (whose company he preferred to that of his fellow men, at least in his later life),[45] Bonnard sought to experience the world as they do: he wanted to try being a bird, for example, painting "on one leg, to see whether a piece acquires greater lightness for having been painted on the wing, as it were".[46] As Michel Terrasse noted, he adopted a bee's eye view for certain still lifes.[47] And John Elderfield reports the following remarkable statement: "I should like to present myself to the young painters of the year 2000 with the wings of a butterfly."[48] It might be said—and this would give Picasso's lack of understanding its full meaning—that there is a certain *bêtise* in Bonnard's work (in terms of both the animality and the stupidity evoked by the word *bête*, whose French dictionary definition reads: "any animated being, with the exception of man"), and that paradoxically, this non-human *bêtise*—the means of escape he sought from the pictorial tradition into which he was born, and from its rationalist subjectivism—is his most human and endearing quality.[49] The passivity and non-choice that so repelled Picasso may also explain why Bonnard constantly multiplied discontinuities in his paintings, and how these *continual* discontinuities created the illusion (which fooled Picasso) that his paintings present us with a "continuous field".[50] His work express the perpetual incomprehensibility of the world, the fact that its only unity is in being an ever fragmentary carpet, an accumulation of opaqueness.

42. See Nicholas Watkins, 1994, p. 16.
43. See Timothy Hyman, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
44. John Elderfield, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
45. There are plenty of testimonies to this. See notably Thadée Nathanson, 1951, pp. 54, 99. The impressions Marthe left on Bonnard's friends (including Thadée Nathanson, who compares her to a bird) all stress her animality (no doubt because of her silence). Perhaps, as Nicholas Watkins suggests (*op. cit.*, p. 69), the extreme sexual liberty apparent in the erotic paintings of 1898-1900—exceedingly rare at the time, and totally absent from Nabi art, as Sarah Whitfield has remarked (*op. cit.*, p. 16)—stemmed from an "animal" conception of sexuality (i.e., one that was free of bourgeois guilt)?
46. Thadée Nathanson, 1948, p. 319.
47. Michel Terrasse, *op. cit.*, p. 279.
48. John Elderfield, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
49. Concerning the humanity of the non-human *bêtise*, and the philosophical aspects of animality, I refer to the delightful small book by Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
50. John Elderfield, with whom I disagree regarding the supposed synthesis that operates when a Bonnard painting is viewed from a distance, proposes a very fine analysis of the constant *papillotage*, or sparkling, of colour in the painter's later work, considering it to be a camouflage strategy intended to mask any differences (*op. cit.*, p. 45). I would go further and say that the multiplicity of "disconstinuities-with-a-view-to-creating-the-illusion-of-uncontrollable-content" apply to every level (underlayer, spatial disjunctions, etc.), not only to the patches of colour. However, I dissociate myself from David Sylvester when he writes, subsequent to the aforementioned passage on the autonomy of objects in *La Table* at the Tate Gallery: "If I accept their separateness, allow myself to be drawn now to one, now to another, I find I have lost the sense of disorientation which resulted from trying to take everything in at once" (*op. cit.*, p. 107). This disorientation seems to me on the contrary to increase along with the realisation that we cannot choose.

BONNARD IN HIS STUDIO IN LE BOSQUET, HIS VILLA IN LE CANNET Cartier-Bresson, 1944 – Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, Paris

SURFACE, ITS COLOUR AND ITS "LAWS"

Georges Roque

A convenient key to understanding Bonnard's work is his membership in the Nabi group, which marked the beginning of his artistic career and resulted in lifelong friendships—with Édouard Vuillard in particular, but also with Maurice Denis and Ker Xavier Roussel, among others.[1] This interpretation is based notably on the flatness to which Denis referred in a famous phrase, but also on the lack of relief, the use of the pure colours advocated by Gauguin, the refusal of values (one of the precepts of Japonisme, as Bonnard himself admitted[2]), the rejection of contrasting complementary colours in favour of the harmony of analogous colours (i.e., those that are close together on the colour circle), and the role of the "decorative" in painting.[3] It is clear that these elements all left their mark on Bonnard and, as they are found to varying degrees in his mature works, it is tempting to join a good number of critics who linked his late and early paintings, suggesting that the latter would shed light on his artistic production in its entirety.

But if we take a look at Bonnard's paintings in precise chronological order, it soon becomes apparent that things are infinitely more complex. The handy interpretative system—which would have us relate the dazzling colours of the artist's early Nabi days to the no less dazzling colours of the inimitable works which earned him his reputation—leaps blithely over twenty years of production, during which Bonnard advanced by trial and error in the struggle to find his way. And that way was far from rectilinear and very much strewn with pitfalls, including two major crises that caused him to modify both his themes and his method. The simplistic view of "Bonnard the Nabi" should therefore be considered very cautiously, as it does not correspond to the reality of his evolution. Instead I would like to propose a different interpretation of his remarkable artistic development, with a detailed look at certain paintings.

Before doing so, however, it is necessary to mention the first change of direction in Bonnard's artistic production. With the Nabi friends he met at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts—Denis, Vuillard, Sérusier, Ranson, Roussel and others—he seemed from the start to have found everything he needed: a group of like-minded friends, an aesthetic and a certain success. As early as 1891,

1. See Claire Frèches-Thory, "Bonnard nabi", in Bordeaux, 1986, pp. 15-25; Isabelle Cahn, "Pierre Bonnard" in *Nabis 1888-1900*, exh. cat., Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993, pp. 107-108.

2. It was through his contact with Japanese popular imagery that he realised "it was possible to translate light, form and character with nothing but colour, with no need of values" (cited by Gaston Diehl, *Comœdia*, 10 July 1943).

3. On this difficult issue, see Nicholas Watkins's historical approach, "The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetics", in Chicago, New York, 2001, pp. 1-28.

Bonnard had sold a poster, for France-Champagne, a key factor in his decision to devote himself entirely to art (this poster also had a decisive influence on the early career of Toulouse-Lautrec).[4] Around 1895, however, he experienced his first crisis and consequently abandoned this mapped-out but diversified path of painting, illustration and decoration, turning instead towards Impressionism. This was apparently a paradoxical move: indeed, the new movements that were grouped together under the all-purpose label of Post-Impressionism were characterised by their rejection of the Impressionist style.[5] Bonnard thus turned to Impressionism at a time when it was the object of almost unanimous criticism from the artistic avant-garde, illustrating the extent to which he went against the tide, or at least followed a wholly independent path.

From the time that he abandoned the Nabi aesthetic—all the while maintaining friendly relationships with his colleagues and continuing to participate in the group's collective exhibitions—his pictorial work can be roughly divided into two series. First, works in which places (the banks of the Seine, the streets of Paris) and subjects (bourgeois recreations such as boating, horse racing and opera) were of Impressionist inspiration, in contrast to their plastic treatment. And second, the *intimiste* interiors representing nudes and everyday scenes, often family meals.

One of the paintings from the latter series is *Man and Woman* (1900, cat. 19), an ambitious work in terms of both theme and size (115 cm high), and the product of lengthy research involving many preparatory sketches and one painting, with the same title, executed the previous year. This work has prompted allegorical interpretations, according to which the screen between the lovers separates them as the Tree of Knowledge separated Adam and Eve.[6] It has also been seen as a "reflection on the difficulty of relationships between men and women"[7]—a very fin-de-siècle theme. Whatever the case, it is an intimate scene which we can assume portrays a couple after lovemaking. In another previous version—*Man and Woman in an Interior* (1898, private collection) in the same bedroom of the studio at 65, rue de Douai, but without a screen—Marthe sits on the edge of the bed, in the process of getting dressed. As reflected in their titles—*Man and Woman in an Interior* becoming *Man and Woman*—the distinction between the two paintings lies in the suppression from the second of elements that were either too anecdotal (the strongly present domestic interior with its bedside table, wardrobe and painting within the painting) or too narrative (the young woman getting dressed), the result being a more general representation that lends itself to allegorical or psychoanalytical interpretations, and in which the folded screen can be associated with the butterfly (symbol of sexual intercourse).[8] The work undoubtedly prompts such interpretations, with the screen that divides it in two. Whatever its meaning, the meticulous composition is reinforced by the play of light accentuating the separation of the lovers who were recently joined in the act of love: the woman is brightly lit, the man is in shadow; she is seated, he is standing. Moreover, her posture is compact, while he stands tall and slender, parallel to the verticals. Finally, the two cats playing on the bed are close to Marthe, whose "feline" nature has often been stressed by critics. The cats—attributes of

4. See Thadée Natanson, *Un Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, Paris, ÉNSBA, 1992, pp. 137-139.

5. See Meyer Schapiro, *Impressionism. Reflections and Perceptions*, New York, George Braziller, 1997, especially the last chapter, "The Reaction to Impressionism", pp. 299f.

6. See the commentary on the work in London, New York, 1998, p. 74.
7. Timothy Hyman, 1998 (London), 2000 (Paris), p. 54.

8. On the link between Bonnard, the butterfly and sexual desire, see John Elderfield, "Seeing Bonnard", in London, New York, 1998, p. 46.

the "ardent lovers" immortalised by Baudelaire[9]—seem here to be enacting a scaled-down love scene, full of playfulness and sensuality.

The composition itself is a skilful one. There is definite depth of field, accentuated by the oblique light that begins in the background on the left and fades as it reaches the male figure. The latter is a nude self-portrait, which is rather rare, especially as the painter exposes himself, literally, with flaccid penis—something that someone such as André Breton would have considered intolerable (indeed he could only bear his partners to see him in a state of erection). Despite the depth of the painting, its vertical lines are particularly apparent: the green band on the far left, which could be a doorway, but has also been interpreted as the upright of a mirror reflecting the whole scene;[10] the folding screen dividing the canvas into two almost equal halves, above which hangs a lamp, a device often used by Bonnard at this period to rectify the perspective; and finally, the tall and slender painter himself, holding a length of material, perhaps a sheet, which unfurls down the right edge of the painting and contrasts with the "bright jumble of underwear and clothing" behind him.[11]

Although this is a far cry from the coloured flat tints of the Nabis, the structure of the composition nonetheless emphasises the verticality of the picture plane, traversed by a bright diagonal. This is an opportunity to draw attention to the chiaroscuro that dominates here, as it does in many *intimiste* paintings from the period, though also in works of Impressionist inspiration. It is a chiaroscuro whose values are inverted, however, as the foreground is dark, with the cats and the front of the bed on the left, the painter on the right, while the background is bright, with Marthe on the left, the clothing on the right. So the influence of Japonisme did not induce Bonnard to abandon chiaroscuro, as is too often claimed, and as he himself intimated. Nevertheless, this is no longer a traditional chiaroscuro. Similar effects are apparent in some of his outdoor scenes, notably *The Cab Horse* (1895, National Gallery of Art, Washington), in which the background of the central scene is strongly illuminated while the foreground features shadow figures. Evidently, the painter's strategy in these paintings was to work not only against traditional perspective, but also against its implications, notably the fact that the central, illuminated subject should be in the foreground and the background literally left in the shade. In this respect, *Man and Woman* manages to restore balance: although Marthe is in the background, she is brightly lit thanks to the window we assume to be to her right, whereas Bonnard, despite being in the foreground, attracts less attention as he is in shade. In short, chiaroscuro is clearly used, but with a view to inverting the traditional roles assigned to foreground and background.

While the contrast in brightness highlights light and darkness, there is no lack of colour. When Thadée Natanson was forced to sell his collection in 1908, he noted the following about this painting belonging to him: "According to the effects of the intense light, the harmony of pink and green evolves into bright greens and pinks, brown reds and black greens."[12] These colours have no doubt lost something of their brilliance (or are no longer considered bright), since what we perceive today is a rather subdued, Vuillard-style harmony, marked by the opposition between the dark red of the back wall and the greens. The latter are

9. Charles Baudelaire, "Les chats", *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade" series, 1961, p. 63.

10. Timothy Hyman, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

11. Thadée Natanson, 1951, p. 116.

12. *Ibid.*

particularly apparent in the vertical lines that they accentuate: the left border of the canvas, the left edge of the folding screen, the right edge of the frame of the painting within the painting. The choice of a red and green harmony is quite common in Bonnard's work, used here to complement the chiaroscuro, and we shall meet further instances of its use. Nevertheless, it was contrary to the Nabi aesthetic, which, following Gauguin's example, had rejected complementary colour harmony.[13] He would not abandon it until a later date, further proof that the view of Bonnard as a faithful disciple of the Nabi doctrine is an overly simplistic one.

13. See Maurice Denis, "Le soleil", in M. Denis, 1920, pp. 218 and 220.

The Dressing Room with Pink Sofa (1908, cat. 20) represents another important stage in Bonnard's development, identified as such in the monograph on the painter written by his nephew Charles Terrasse in 1927. Terrasse characterises this painting as the moment when the artist ventured "onto the path of colour".[14] Since the book met with Bonnard's approval, we can suppose it to reflect his own feelings. Yet what strikes us here is not so much the colour as the light—a rather chalky light that floods the room, entering through the window opposite Marthe, who "drinks the light with all her skin".[15] This radiant light gives the composition its brightness. In this respect it can be compared to *Man and Woman*: in both paintings, Marthe's body is illuminated by a diagonal shaft of light that enters through a window. All similarity ends there, however, for although *Man and Woman* respects the play of chiaroscuro, the same is not true in this case: despite the intense brightness, shadows have disappeared almost entirely, except for the slight indication of the shadow of Marthe's feet on the floor. The rest of the room is bathed in a constant, diffuse light. Our perception of the scene is oriented by the window that we know, because of the frame and the flimsy curtain, to be facing Marthe. But if we take a closer look, as so many of Bonnard's works require, we perceive the green and yellow wallpaper to the right to be just as bright as the window itself. And, except for a small glint of white on her cheekbone, Marthe's face—which ought to be brightly lit—is of the same dark tone as the hair that covers her neck, which is in the shade. Moreover, although a white, and therefore bright, line highlights her upper body and the contour of her left breast, a similar white line emphasises the curve of her back and the hollow of her buttocks. It is as if another, invisible light—as intense as that from the window—were shining from the right to capture the figure from behind and balance the scene's brightness; indeed, a patch of light is discernible at Marthe's right elbow. This interpretation, however, contradicts one of the painting's titles, *Nu à contre-jour*—though the canvas itself refutes the suggestion of *contre-jour*.

14. Charles Terrasse, 1927, p. 106.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 102. Concerning the identity of the model, see the commentary for the work, p. 118.

The painting is thus important in many ways. Its skilful composition leaves us in some doubt as to the subject, hence the different titles: *The Dressing Room with Pink Sofa*, in which the emphasis is on the interior, the room and its function, furnishings and colours; *Eau de Cologne*, which stresses the narrative element of a young woman perfuming herself; and finally, *Nude Against the Light*. The number of titles alone suggests that this is rather more than an *intimiste* scene. The formal, hieratic pose in the flood of light also supports this suggestion, as does the constant brightness that fills the room and cancels out the shadows: the dressing

table, although in the shade, is a dazzling white, as is the bathtub, whose rim is only slightly shaded. Finally, then, the colour is magnified rather than subdued by the intense brightness—which is no doubt what Charles Terrasse intended to stress. The pink sofa that features in one of the titles, for example, is positioned in line with the window and should be devoured by the light, instead of which its colour stands out. So does the little rug at Marthe's feet, which is highlighted by a harmony of saturated red and green. In short, what this painting reveals is the art of surfaces—surfaces which diffuse colour,[16] reflect light, and sometimes mirror it like a looking-glass.

Indeed, for Bonnard, the primary function of a mirror was not its reflection of a scene. The only mirror playing that role here is the one on the dressing table, which, contrary to other contemporary works (*The Bathroom Mirror*, 1908, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts), occupies a modest place in the composition. The water in the bathtub is another reflecting surface; it is larger than the dressing table mirror but reflects only a very small portion of the window. Hence it has been suggested that there are two mirrors in this painting.[17] Yet there is at least one more—an adjustable three-part mirror above Marthe's head.[18] The element running alongside the right edge of the painting seems at first sight to represent an opening, framed by the thickness of the wall, with the narrow green band hinting at the room behind. But although there is a relative ambiguity here, one need only look a little lower to perceive the reflection of the back of the pink sofa in what may now be considered a fourth mirror, placed behind the sofa (which in any case would obstruct an opening).

Why does this scene contain so many mirrors—one in almost every corner of the painting—which echo each other across its diagonals? Firstly, they contribute to the flood of light that bathes the painting, reflecting it from every part of the room. The large wood-framed mirror on the right "explains"—if an explanation is absolutely necessary—how the back of the figure shown in *contre-jour* can be brightly lit, the brightest tints being just below the small of her back. Secondly, as has already been pointed out,[19] these mirror surfaces are essentially matt, which thus confirms their role as luminous surfaces rather than as the means of reflecting a scene. The matt quality of the mirrors, particularly striking in the three-part one, is equivalent to the fine curtain that renders the window opaque and makes it all the easier to diffuse the light.

Moreover, in many of the paintings in which Bonnard used a mirror—including even the admirable self-portraits painted at the end of his life—it plays a complementary role, bringing the illusion of the third dimension back to the picture plane. The tension between surface and depth is apparent in many paintings; the mirror allows the painter to suggest the third dimension while simultaneously reducing it to a surface. Its role is thus not to enlarge the space, as has been claimed, but on the contrary to demonstrate that this very space is suggested by means of a flat plane. In this respect the mirror—like the window, another frequent motif in Bonnard's work, with which the mirror is brilliantly associated—both condenses and reflects his conception of the painting, for which it provides an appropriate metaphor, inviting us never to lose sight of the fact that the illusion of the third dimension is always created through surface.

16. On this phenomenon of colour diffusion, see Libero Zuppiroli and Marie-Noëlle Bussac, *Traité des couleurs*, Lausanne, Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2001, pp. 57f.

17. See Sasha Newman's commentary in Paris, Washington, Dallas, 1984, p. 58.

18. A similar, more visible mirror appears in *The Mantelpiece* (1913), Musée de l'Annonciade, Saint-Tropez.

19. "... Bonnard's mirrors are matt too. All the mirrors that he fits into his paintings for our delight, be they large or small, are coated with a silvering of his own design" (Thadée Natanson, 1951, p. 207).

The Dressing Room with Pink Sofa marks a radical change in Bonnard's use of light and colour, a change which occurred, interestingly, nearly a year before the trip to the south of France that is supposed to have inspired it. Indeed, it was during the summer of 1909 that Bonnard discovered "reflections as colourful as lights".[20] This goes against the official chronology, since the painter did not wait for the "revelation" of southern France before suppressing shadows from his paintings; consequently, the trip he made the following year was no doubt one of confirmation. Contrary to Bonnard's supposed indifference to the avant-gardes of his day, it could well be that *The Dressing Room with Pink Sofa* was a reaction—albeit a highly personal one—to Fauvism. As soon as he arrived in Collioure in July 1905, Derain had written to Vlaminck, evoking "the light, a blonde light, a golden hue that suppresses the shadows".[21] And Bonnard must have seen Fauve paintings at the Salon d'Automne, where he also exhibited.

Bonnard pursued this development when he settled in Vernonnet, near Giverny, and it appears flagrantly in the work entitled *Dining Room in the Country* (1913, cat. 34). Just as the luminous intensity is constant and diffuse in *The Dressing Room with Pink Sofa*, here it is identical in both the indoor and outdoor scenes. This is, no doubt, one of the "laws" regarding the construction of surface as a surface to which the painter alluded in one of his diary notes: "The main subject is the surface, which has its colour, its laws, over and above the objects."[22] One of Bonnard's primary concerns was that a scene viewed through a window or a French door should not attract attention by any excessive luminosity, which would pierce the space—hence the need to make the walls adjacent to the openings equally bright. Another "law" is that people and objects should not acquire too much importance. Thus Marthe, though still present, is outside, leaning at the window; the cats that were playing on the bed in *Man and Woman* are also more discreet, enhancing the interaction between surfaces.

Bonnard's use of colour is again contrary to the Nabi aesthetic: the scheme is one of complementary colour contrast, whose intensity echoes that of the light. Marthe, who had a fondness for vivid clothes, wears a bright red blouse, which contrasts with the surrounding vegetation. Likewise, the orangey surface of the left wall contrasts with the bluish tablecloth, whose colour is repeated on the left side of the open door. Bonnard was no doubt preoccupied by this treatment of colour, which must have engendered the crisis he then experienced as the desire to master this "colour that is frightening"[23] by integrating it into the composition. This situation was aptly summarised by Charles Terrasse in his description of the painting: "No more hesitant lines: drawing comes first, and composition. See the precise curve of the table, the straight lines of the door, of the window, of the slightest object. Colour only came later. It was adapted to the framework of the drawing, and did not go beyond it."[24]

Seven years later, Bonnard had managed to integrate colour and drawing into his *Normandy Landscape* (1920, cat. 45). The use of complementary colour contrasts brings out opposing hues when they are juxtaposed, but the process entails "clashes"—Gauguin had already complained of this—that detract from the overall composition. If colour is to be "reasoned"—and here Bonnard reverses the

20. Pierre Bonnard, letter to his mother, undated, in Pierre Bonnard, 1944. Françoise Cachin has drawn attention to the fact that this letter (published over thirty years after the events) should be regarded with circumspection (Françoise Cachin, "C'est l'Éden retrouvé", in Paris, 2000-2001, p. 58).

21. André Derain, *Lettres à Vlaminck suivies de la correspondance de guerre* (ed. P. Dagen), Paris, Flammarion, 1994, letter no. 56, written from Collioure in mid-July 1905, p. 159.

22. Pierre Bonnard, note in his diary, 2 December 1935.

23. Charles Terrasse, 1927, p. 128.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

traditional relationship between drawing and colour—then it must be dissociated from its mimetic function, while playing a central role in the composition. *Normandy Landscape* is remarkable above all for its exploration of the role of similar tones, even though the painter had not yet definitively renounced complementary colours, which he was still using during this period, for example to structure his *Portrait of the Bernheim-Jeune Brothers* (ca. 1920, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), his art dealers. Indeed, apart from some red touches, the Normandy landscape is dominated by a chromatic harmony based on subtle, progressive passages from blue to green and green to yellow. The eye thus glides uninterruptedly from one area to another, roughly from the bottom to the top of the canvas: from the green and greenish yellow of the hedge, to the turquoise blue of the field, to the green of the trees (with the occasional touch of yellow, perhaps suggesting the beginning of autumn),[25] to the (chiefly turquoise) blue of the sky, and finally to the yellow band at the top.

In his desire to construct his painting as a surface, Bonnard was led to elaborate what must be called a chromatic strategy.[26] This consisted primarily of working with analogous colours, which give the surface of the canvas its unity and homogeneity. Colour is more than just harmony, however; another of its essential roles is to structure space, and thus the viewer's perception. In this respect, Bonnard was extremely attentive to two particular areas where the picture plane is most fragile—namely the bottom, by means of which the eye enters the painting, and the top, through which it attempts to escape. Consequently, he often sought to place brighter colours at the top and bottom of a canvas, while using a lighter tonality—white, in many cases—for the central area. In *Normandy Landscape,* the hedge in the foreground serves to establish the front of the space, and its bright colour catches the eye (a bottle is often used for this purpose in the still life paintings). The yellow band across the top of the canvas plays the same role, all the more importantly because of the vertical format of this work: it prevents the viewer's gaze from losing itself in the blue of the sky by rectifying the space so that it looks like what it is—a surface. This, then, is further proof of the strategy that Bonnard elaborated patiently to counter the traditional technique of aerial perspective, which generally consists of progressively darkening the planes as their distance from the foreground increases, in order to suggest depth.

This broaches another fundamental aspect: the suppression of the system of values, which structures a painting according to the degree of lightness or darkness of its colours. The yellow band across the top of *Normandy Landscape* is particularly efficient in that it is as bright as the yellow-green hedge that forms its pendant. These analogous colours are thus given equal value—which is essential for the construction of the surface, since the impression of the third dimension is generally created by playing with values. Bonnard was well aware of this problem, to which he referred in the following note: "Look out for the moment when colour is transformed into value."[27] Indeed, once colour becomes part of the value system, space acquires depth and the desired effect of surface is lost. We should point out again here that, although Bonnard's suppression of value contrast may have been inspired by Japanese prints, it was not implemented until he

25. Nicholas Watkins, 1994, p. 153.

26. I develop this point in the third part of my book on Bonnard (Georges Roque, 2006), in which I explore this strategy (as regards composition, light and colour) with reference to the decorative.

27. Pierre Bonnard, note in his diary, 6 October 1938.

had drawn all the conclusions from the approach to colour and light inaugurated by *The Dressing Room with Pink Sofa*.

So we see how the various chromatic aspects interrelate, contributing to a well-considered strategy whose aim is to construct the surface. These aspects include an all-over composition, with juxtapositions of similar colours rather than complementary colour contrasts; the suppression of values to equalise colours and keep them on the same plane; the structuring of perception, with areas of equal luminous and chromatic intensity at the top and bottom forcing the eye to travel between foreground and background; and a less dramatic central area for good measure.

Fifteen or so years later, this technique had been perfectly mastered, as is demonstrated by *Nude in the Bath* (1936-1938, cat. 74), one of Bonnard's greatest works. This does not mean that it had become an easy task: regarding a similar painting begun shortly afterwards, the artist complained bitterly of the difficulty of the motif.[28] What instantly strikes the viewer here is the dazzling impression of wholeness that emanates from this painting—a marvel of shimmering tones—and its harmonious integration of all the ingredients dear to Bonnard: intense luminosity rendered by an "equivalent", as Maurice Denis would have said; an equally powerful chromatic intensity; and the presence of Marthe, who floats in the centre of the composition, beautifully incorporated into the scene by means of the water in which the tones of the wall are reflected.

If we try not to be dazzled by the colours and instead to examine the painting in detail, however, we realise that everything is "wrong". First, the perspective: Marthe's face is seen from above, so that her chin appears flattened, yet the bath is viewed from a different angle, more in profile. The painter evidently condensed a number of drawings showing distinct views.[29] Another improbable detail, from the logical viewpoint of mimetic accuracy, is that the left side of the bath is straight, after the artifice of the "join" formed by the little towel casually placed there, whereas the surface of the water is definitely curved. Then the light: the tiles on the back wall are interrupted by vertical bands that would seem to suggest a window, yet the principal light—a large, whitish, vertical area in the centre of the composition—is just to the right of the supposed blue window, itself no doubt the reflection of a light coming from the left. This suggests that there is another, hidden light source on our side (i.e., behind the viewer looking at the canvas),[30] hence the dazzling whiteness of the bath's side, which contrasts with the vivid red shadow below it. The painting also seems to be illuminated by a third light source, in the bottom right corner, which would explain the touches of bright yellow painted over the floor mosaic.[31] Bonnard's epigrammatic definition of painting as "lots of little lies for the sake of one great truth" can seldom be so aptly applied to a work.[32]

But what is this great truth? The composition of a surface constructed in such a way that it appears seamless: "A painting is a series of patches that unite to form the object, the area over which the eye travels without a hitch."[33] The end justifies the means, and all the "little lies" have their *raison d'être*. The left side of the bath is straight, rather than oval like the surface of the water, so that the eye does

28. Ingrid Rydbeck, 1992, n. p.

29. A drawing of a nude in the bath, reproduced in a special issue of *Verve* devoted to Bonnard in 1947, shows Marthe in two simultaneously incompatible positions: the legs are those of Marthe lying in the bath, but the raised torso turned towards the viewer corresponds to Marthe in the process of getting out of the water.

30. There actually was a window there; see fig. 32, p. 82, in London, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1994.

31. There was a window on that side too. Nicholas Watkins has reconstituted the three light sources that bathed the back wall of the bathroom in Bonnard's villa at Le Cannet (1998, p. 69); the painter used them to extraordinary advantage in his representation of this wall.

32. Gaston Diehl, "Les vertus cardinales du peintre. Extraits d'une conversation avec Bonnard", *Les Problèmes de la peinture* (ed. G. Diehl), Confluences, 1945, p. 202.

33. Remarks collected by André Tériade in 1942, reproduced in the special issue of *Verve*, 1947, n. p.

not plunge into an illusory depth; the water at the surface of the bath thus shifts into a vertical position.[34] The use of colours stems from the same concern. As is often the case in Bonnard's work, the bright red patches under the feet of the bath are intended to attract the eye to the foreground and are "supported" (to use his term) by another area of bright colour—in this case, the yellows of the tiles. Thus the eye is caught between two patches of bright colour—one in the bottom, the other in the top—but can travel thanks to a white area, generally situated towards the centre of the composition; the outer side of the bath plays that role here, together with the little white rug, which was no doubt added once he had painted the floor tiles.

The colour is limited to a basic blue and yellow harmony, with an infinite number of shades: the blue is sometimes light, sometimes mauvish, sometimes sprinkled with touches of green (especially on the floor, to the left). The yellow is sometimes next to patches of pink, but it also contains traces of green, which thus link the blue and yellow, as if there were an affinity between these two primaries and the result of their subtractive blending.

There is no looking-glass in this scene, because the surface of the water plays the role of a mirror, reflecting the surface of the wall. It appears bluish, whitish or yellowish, according to the colour that predominates on the adjacent portion of wall—itself subject to the various light sources that strike it. Marthe merges with the water as the subject merges with the canvas, which is why what ultimately emerges is the triumph of painting: a play of interrelating surfaces. In short, this bath is one of light and colour, with remarkable chromatic continuity between the floor mosaic, the surface of the water, Marthe's body and the tiles on the wall.

I shall conclude this study with the painting entitled *The Studio with Mimosa* (cat. 88), which can be considered one of Bonnard's last works: it was begun in 1939, but reworked in 1946. The plunging view from the mezzanine of the artist's studio at Le Bosquet, his villa at Le Cannet, was bold: by framing the scene to glorify the splendid landscape and imposing mass of mimosa, there was a risk of reintroducing the window as a *veduta*, giving onto something else. How did he manage to avoid the predominance of the outdoor scene, despite the eye-catching bright yellow of the mimosa? The problem posed by windows and French doors confronted Bonnard all his life: how to adjust the space so that a suggestion of depth would not imply the eye being drawn towards the distant blues of the horizon. The metallic window frame plays the role of grid here, intensifying the presence of the window whose uprights, parallel to the wall, contribute to the perception of a vertical surface. The colours serve the same purpose. The mimosa obviously sets the tone, which needed to be equally strong on the walls so that the mimosa would not create a "hole" in the image—particularly in the outdoor scene.[35] This explains the choice of a yellow very close to that of the mimosa for the right wall, a red for the left wall, and a red and pink band under the window; the whole canvas is thus equally dazzling. The surface is so dense that there is no white area—so how can the eye travel over the canvas without sustaining visual saturation? No doubt thanks to the diagonal of the rail, which provides a smooth

34. When confronted with the same problem in the following work (i.e. how to show the left side of the bath), he found a different solution and made the edge of the bath coincide with the corner of the wall; this is particularly visible at a stage prior to the final version of the painting (in which he added a window at that spot), in a photograph taken in Deauville, reproduced in Michel Terrasse, 1996, p. 253.

35. Bonnard explained to Pierre Courthion: "The whole painting must be supported, you understand. There must not be any holes". Pierre Courthion, "Quand Bonnard vivait encore", *L'Art indépendant. Panorama international de 1900 à nos jours*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1958, p. 41. It is noteworthy that Bonnard and Matisse shared the same concern.

transition between indoors and outdoors, while also making it possible to avoid the perspectival cube that might otherwise have been created by the square format (127 x 127 cm) of this work.

The rail interrupts a verticality that would otherwise be too monotonous and gently guides the eye towards the right. It also explains why we don't immediately perceive the enigmatic presence of a face in the bottom left corner—a ball of pinkish yellow surmounted by a kind of bright halo—whose features emerge either because they are accentuated in red (like the arch of the eyebrows) or more discreetly sketched in crayon. Could this be the ghostly apparition of Marthe, who died in 1942 and to whom the painter wanted to pay a final tribute? Perhaps. Beyond speculation, this face raises a more general question—that of the objects or people that Bonnard deliberately relegated to the periphery of his paintings, and which have been much commented on.

It is indeed striking that certain inanimate objects, often a tablecloth in the interior scenes, are used to make the centre of many paintings free or empty, whereas living creatures like people and animals are placed at the edges, so that it often takes a while to notice them. It has been claimed, with some justification, that this unusual method is largely responsible for the extraordinary modernity of some of Bonnard's works, precisely because his refusal to focus on a primary subject in the centre of the composition achieves a sudden and unexpected fullness, creating the effect of an open, all-over style of painting.[36] It may seem excessive to refer to all-over painting here, even though other critics have used it to describe Bonnard's conception of surface as a decorative one which ignores the hierarchy between centre and periphery.[37] In fact, although all-over style is more readily associated with Jackson Pollock's painting, it is worth noting that Clement Greenberg compared the pre-drip Pollock to Bonnard, since both used unstretched canvases pinned onto a wall.[38] Thanks to this particular technique, Bonnard was not bound by a pre-established format (which often meant beginning with the "central" subject in the middle of the canvas); on the contrary, he was free to add objects, faces or figures at the edges as he pleased, and thus to give equal importance to every part of the surface.

Still, we need to understand this systematic and thus deliberate intention, of which *The Studio with Mimosa* provides one of the last illustrations. It has been suggested that the painter wanted to represent unfocused and peripheral vision.[39] This hypothesis is initially appealing, especially when based on quotes from the artist which appear to support it, such as his declaration that he wanted to "show what one sees when one suddenly enters a room".[40] But the fact that the painting creates this impression does not mean that Bonnard's goal was to represent some of the physiological processes of vision; that would be to attribute to him the kind of "scientific" intention that was far removed from his artistic preoccupations. Yet if we dismiss this interpretation, how can we explain his persistence in moving objects and human figures from the centre towards the edges? An answer that is more consistent with the rest of this study stems from Bonnard's "decorative" aesthetic: he wanted to avoid having the focal point in the centre with mere "padding" at the sides; the same was true, as we have seen, of the relationship between foreground and background, or between top and bottom. Placing

36. See "A Kind of Informality. David Sylvester, Michael Podro and Andrew Forge talking about Bonnard", *Studio International*, vol. 171, no. 874, February 1966, especially pp. 49-51.

37. Prior to the discussion which has just been cited, the English painter and critic Patrick Heron had already used it in the text he began at the death of Bonnard (1947), which was published in 1955: "Pierre Bonnard and Abstraction", in Patrick Heron, *The Changing Forms of Art*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, p. 122.

38. Clement Greenberg, "The Jackson Pollock Market Soars" (1961), in C. Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993, vol. IV, p. 111.

39. Already suggested during the aforementioned discussion between Sylvester, Podro and Forge, the idea was developed at length by Jean Clair, "Les aventures du nerf optique", in Paris, Washington, Dallas, 1984, pp. 16f., then taken up again and discussed by John Elderfield, *op. cit.*, pp. 33f.

40. Cited by Jean Clair, *op. cit.*, p. 19. Contrary to his indication (note 3, p. 19), this phrase does not feature in those of Bonnard's notes that were assembled by Antoine Terrasse in the same catalogue (Paris, Washington, Dallas, 1984), pp. 176f.

objects at the sides or in the background thus meant countering the visual importance—indeed the "power"—accorded to the centre.[41] This compositional scheme has the enormous advantage of conferring equal importance to the whole surface, and goes some way to explaining the astonishing "fullness" of some of his paintings.

More generally, we are faced with the delicate question of what the painter gives us to see. According to Bonnard, "Few people know how to see, to see well, to see fully."[42] In order to see fully, however, one needs to know what there is to see! It is striking to note how attitudes to Bonnard's work have changed according to the period, each generation "seeing" something different in his paintings: *intimiste* scenes, the little pleasures of bourgeois life during the Third Republic, the joy of painting, abstract compositions, and more recently the representation of the psycho-physiological processes of vision.[43] For my part, I have tried to suggest that what Bonnard shows us is painting—painting as paint—i.e., the "flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order" of his friend Maurice Denis, or, to quote Bonnard himself once more, the fact that "the main subject is the surface, which has its colour, its laws, over and above the objects".

41. See Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center. A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*, Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 1982.

42. Cited by Michel Terrasse, 1996, p. 113.

43. On attitudes to Bonnard, see the first part of the book I have devoted to him, *op. cit.*

PIERRE BONNARD IN HIS ROOM AT THE CENTRAL HOTEL IN URIAGE-LES-BAINS George Besson, 1918 - Private collection

BONNARD "*DU CÔTÉ DE CHEZ PROUST*"

Michel Makarius

The notes that Bonnard hastily scribbled in his diaries reflect the importance he attached to time and memory.[1] A few examples: "The model before one's eyes, and the model in one's head" (3 July 1935); "Consciousness, the shock of sensation and memory" (8 May 1936); "The work of art: suspending time" (16 November 1936). In addition to his notes regarding time, Bonnard's diaries were also filled with records of day-by-day changes in the weather.

So Bonnard's world—from the landscapes of Provence to a woman at her toilette—is presented to the viewer through the filter of memory. The elusive face of Marthe—more an evanescent presence than a real, flesh-and-blood human being—and the open-air paintings, whose colours transcend natural light, demonstrate that the painter rinsed his brush in the flowing waters of memory. This pictorial quest for time has inspired most critics to compare his work—justifiably—to that of Marcel Proust. It now remains for us to take a more detailed look at how, in the shadow of the *Search*, Bonnard's painting is that of *Time Regained*.[2] The spirit uniting painter and writer provides us with a unique opportunity to observe painting by means of literature and constitutes a particularly fine example of the interrelation of the arts.

Despite their different modes of expression, painting and writing share the ability to create images—in the writer's case, through the use of metaphor. Metaphor plays a major role in Proust's work: it forms the significant structure and causality of his work, giving his sensible world its means of expression and allowing "time to always take the form of space".[3] In the painter's case, this applies to the movement of his work—the way he transforms reality, elevating it to a height at which it is illuminated by a new and unexpected light. This is exemplified by *The Terrace at Vernon* (1928, cat. 50), in which the density of blues, mauves and greens (reminiscent of certain colour harmonies in Gauguin's work) transforms the banks of the Seine into a tropical, monsoon-washed shoreline, with a parrot perched atop the balustrade.

The chromatically saturated pictorial surface in this painting is comparable to the "boundless space" of Proustian writing with its branching structure;[4] it is made even more complex by the "alliteration" of colours, which call and answer each other, converge and spread.[5] See how the glowing flesh tints of Marthe's skin focalise the colours of the bathroom, as if her bodily presence were steeped in all the substances that surround her—the water, the tiles, the earthenware, the towel; or how, in the masterly *Nude in the Bath* (1936-1938, cat. 74) the tiled wall with its streaming colours is refracted in the shimmering water which enhances the forms of the female body. The painter uses this free chromatic flow—in which the same colour is imparted to a shoulder and a window frame, to a dress and to a dessert on a table—to weave an emotional if not loving space,[6] which extracts what is visible from the "contingencies of time". Thus Bonnard sometimes hides figures in the

1. *Carnets*, reproduced in Paris, Washington, Dallas, 1984.

2. It will have been understood that this concerns neither the possible meeting between the two creators, nor the figure of Elstir (partly inspired by Vuillard), nor even the respective influences that each may have had on the other. It should be remembered that Proust died in 1922.

3. Georges Poulet, *L'Espace Proustien*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983 [1st ed. 1963], p. 135. Apart from what Proust himself wrote on metaphor, many critics (Gaétan Picon, Georges Poulet, Gérard Genette, Jean-Pierre Richard, Gilles Deleuze, Philippe Lejeune, Julia Kristeva) agree in emphasising the central role of metaphor in the Proustian aesthetic.

4. Georges Poulet, *op. cit.*, p. 82. By refusing to dissociate immediate sensation and memory, the act of creation never quite detaches itself from the flux of the life that bears it: we know how problematical the moment of the completion of a work was for Bonnard, as for Proust.

5. Annotated by Gérard Genette and Philippe Lejeune, Proust's metaphorical use of the word "alliteration" has its visual equivalent in Bonnard's work, and makes it possible to establish a link with Mallarmé's aesthetic theories, illustrated by the famous verse "*Aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore*".

6. See the essay by Julia Kristeva, *Proust et le temps sensible*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994.

landscape by merging them with the grass and foliage, such as the girl picking flowers, framed by the French window in *Dining Room in the Country* (1913, cat. 34). These chameleon-women, who gradually emerge from the patches of brown and gold foliage, created by the spread of adjacent colours, correspond to Proust's idea that the evocation of a person cannot be dissociated from that person's habitual environment: "Literature should only show a woman wearing, like a mirror, the colours of the tree or river near to which we generally picture her."[7] Sometimes, the brightness of a colour surpasses its object, and the essence is instantly revealed: this is the case with the spray of gold in *The Studio with Mimosa* (1939-1946, cat. 88), and the snowy flecks of *Almond Tree in Blossom* (1946-1947, cat. 89). Then, as Proust would say, "the true colour of each thing moves us like a harmony, we want to cry when we see that roses are pink, or when in winter we see beautiful, almost reflective, greens on the trunks of trees; and if a little light should happen to touch these colours—as at sunset, when the white lilac gives song to its whiteness—then we feel inundated with beauty."[8]

Proust's phrase, with its offshoots and ramifications, follows the aggregates and leaps of the mind since, as the narrator says, in order for beauty to be revealed its essence must be extracted "by comparing a quality common to two sensations".[9] The network of analogy and proximity (the figures of metaphor and metonymy respectively) that weaves the Proustian image has been analysed at length by literary critics. And this image is constantly nourished and heightened both by the substance of the spectacle of nature (especially when light falls upon it, in infinite variations) and by the reminiscences and associations of ideas that it inspires.[10]

However, in order to gather "a little time in a pure state" as Proust says in *Time Regained*,[11] the "miracle of analogy" has to be supplemented by the kind of commotion that sparks involuntary memory. The famous episodes of the madeleine and the uneven paving stones in the Guermantes courtyard express the slight jolt of a sixth sense that interrupts a line of thought and prompts the sudden emergence of a memory. Proust describes the hazy images revived by the rediscovered flavour of his childhood madeleine as an "elusive eddying of stirred-up colours".[12] The process of recollection thus goes back to the most primitive layer of consciousness, where taste and sight communicate in the confusion of the senses. This is why, well before it settles in the form of a sky, a tree or a meadow, the coloured emulsion of *Normandy Landscape* (1920, finished ca. 1926-1930, cat. 46), or the tangle of *The Flowering Apple Tree* (*Balcon à Vernonnet*, 1920-1933, cat. 47) and *The Garden* (1936-1938, cat. 77) evoke elusive moments of former happiness, of which we know only that they were generated by the efflorescence of a spring day.

Like the Proustian incidents which spark the return of memories, the effervescence of colour and distortions of space in Bonnard's interiors disrupt familiar viewing habits. The painter noted his intention to "show what one sees when one suddenly enters a room", seeking the visual consequences of the sixth sense in "the adventures of the optic nerve". And this impact finds expression in a variety of ways: in *The Studio with Mimosa* the effect is one of bedazzlement, in which the overabundant yellow mass needs to be dispersed before Marthe's face appears on the side wall. In *White Interior* (1932, cat. 57), the radiance of the light-drenched scene blinds us to the presence of the young woman leaning towards the cat, as our gaze

7. *Bulletin de la Société des amis de Marcel Proust*, Paris, 1958, no. 8, p. 466, quoted by Jean-Pierre Richard.

8. Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Paris, Gallimard, 1965 [1954], p. 194.

9. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1954, vol. III, pp. 889-890.

10. See Jean-Pierre Richard, *Proust et le monde sensible*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1974.

11. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 872.

12. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 43.

lingers on the French window where the outdoor landscape is portrayed in three different ways: through the open door, through the window, and reflected in its glass. The painter's skilful use of white is also noteworthy. In *Still Life with Cat* (1924, cat. 60), the transparent glass of the carafe and the shiny porcelain of the crockery modulate the constant whiteness of the tablecloth before coming together on the fur of the watchful cat. Bonnard uses white as a reflecting surface, creating a contre-jour that softens contrasts, blurs contours and colours shade. In *Promenade at Sea* (1924, Villa Flora, Winterthur), the light captured by the boat's square sail overwhelms the passengers aboard. The contre-jour in *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden* (Arcachon) (1931-1932, cat. 54), for example, darkens the walls of the room, while the eye overcomes the interlocking obstacles of the French window and the balustrade to alight on the little fence at the back of the garden.

Further disruptions of perception are generated not only by effects of light, but also by decentralised compositions and by the dispersal of objects, with figures relegated to the edges of the painting, all of which is rendered more complex by the inclusion of heterogeneous areas. Moments when perception wavers—as in the impressive *Nude in the Bath*, in which the plunging viewpoint shifts the rectangle of the bath from horizontal to vertical, disturbing spatial reference points until the narrow bluish band, painted as a counterpoint to the bath, becomes the fold of an upright bathrobe. Other devices involving doors, windows and mirrors disrupt spatial coherence by reducing planes—either through paradoxical juxtaposition, as in *The Café* Au Petit Poucet, *Place Clichy, in the Evening* (1928, cat. 58), or through overlapping planes, as in *The Dining Room, Vernon* (1925-1927, cat. 35), now in Copenhagen, in which the woodwork elements are superimposed while a pane of glass contains the reflection of a face.

When the eye is confronted with these clashes and discontinuities, it wanders at first in an attempt to unify the scene. By thus engaging the viewer in these scenes from his personal life, by involving our gaze in the slow task of recomposition, Bonnard captures the instants which allow the visible to unfold—which, like Proustian reminiscence, are so many instants "freed from the order of time".[13] The delight we then experience is akin to the joy of a rediscovered memory.

13. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 872.

DEFERRALS / ENDINGS[1]

Deepak Ananth

"A brush in one hand ... a rag in the other", reads one of Bonnard's notebook entries, its very laconism a foil to the protracted nature of the task at hand.[2] The profound meditation on appearances that is Bonnard's great theme proceeds in tandem, as it were, with an exacting attentiveness to the surface of his paintings. And even if one was unaware of the extended periods of time that his manner of working often entailed, looking at a Bonnard is, typically, a decelerating process: the gaze is forced to slow down in front of the retinal flux that is so enigmatically arrayed; however much a remembering of a particular instant, the viewing experience is anything but instantaneous. "The picture is a series of blotches which are joined together and finally form the object, the finished piece—over which the eye might wander completely unhindered," Bonnard observes. If his paintings from the mid-1920s onwards have an "all-overness" comparable to a textile surface, it is in the light of the stock-taking of Impressionism that Bonnard undertook in the aftermath of his Nabi years: the dense chromatic weave is one consequence of the lesson drawn from Impressionism's dissolution of the distinction between line and colour, with a new expressive freedom granted thereby to the painterly touch. The penchant for "all-overness" is probably also related to what would have appeared to the painter as the seamlessness of the support, given his predilection for working on ready-primed canvases that were simply pinned to the wall, divested of the clear-cut edges and object-like finality that they would have inevitably acquired had they been stretched and placed on an easel. And indeed Bonnard's tendency to draw up a provisional margin, rather summarily indicated, was a working illusion as far as the physical limits of the painting were concerned, an instance of the leeway accorded to his brush in its desire to stray from the centre. "I always like to work on a piece of unstretched canvas larger than the final image. This gives me room for alteration..."[3]

The alterations or modifications were of the same order as the tentative coalescence of individual brushstrokes that was Bonnard's manner of building up the picture surface. But not only the marks deposited by the brush in as much as rags and his fingertips also left their trace. A Bonnard painting tends to be a web of tremulous adjustments of tone and colour, an infinitely nuanced sequence of attunements in the transposition of private sensation into pictorial notation. "Paint, not the thing, but the effect that it produces" had been Mallarmé's famous injunction, something more easily said than done for a painter for whom it was the after-effects of memory that were in question.[4] The chromatic translucence, the almost uncanny radiance bespoke both artifice and affect; it was the glow that aureoled the remembered moment. The slight blur, the diffuse bloom and vibration of the paint surface thus become marvellously evocative of the productive vacillations between recollection and representation that lie at the heart of Bonnard's painting. The brushstroke was loaded indeed, and not just with pigment, as this note makes clear: "Rhetoric in the realisation of the work: Calling up one's mental reserves of beautiful shapes and colours, the outcome of personal observation, and of observations of the masters, conjured up before one's eyes at each brushstroke."

The modulations of the dabs and patches of colour needed to be continually reviewed in relation to the larger design, the overall pattern, a procedure familiar to all painters, of course, but perhaps particularly demanding in Bonnard's case, given the extraordinary

1. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from Bonnard are from a selection made by Antoine Terrasse in Paris, Washington, Dallas, 1984, pp. 179-203.
2. Quoted by Charles Terrasse, "Nouvelles acquisitions, *L'Amandier en fleur* de Bonnard", *Revue du Louvre et des musées de France*, 14th year, no. 3, 1964, p. 144.
3. Quoted in Jean Leymarie, "preface", in *Bonnard et Le Cannet* by Michel Terrasse's book, Paris, Herscher, 1987, p. 9.
4. Stéphane Mallarmé in a letter to Henri Cazalis in 1864. Quoted in *Mallarmé*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1965.

spatial complexities of his pictures. The markedly centrifugal orientation, the visually replete margins, the curiously angled viewpoints, the upended perspective, the insinuation of the viewer's nearness to the scene depicted, the framed views within views, the ambiguous relation between foreground and background, between the interior and the exterior, the omnipresence of windows and mirrors, of shadows and reflections—it would seem as if Bonnard couldn't help conceiving of space as an intricate conundrum, a space in which every nook and cranny was worthy of attention. (This is why "all-overness" is not just a formal trait but an intimation of the generous inclusiveness of his vision.)

What was on the periphery of vision was as tantalising as what lay directly in front. The competing foci of interest make for an incessant but unhurried and certainly erratic mobility of the gaze across the span of the picture, a continuum of multiple solicitations and idiosyncratic transitions articulated by the smudges and smears of paint. The brushwork is poised between disclosure and dissolution, as if echoing a modality of subjective perception that wavers between the intensity of attention and its potential dispersion. It is as if Bonnard discovers for himself the paradoxical aspect of perception according to which the object scrutinised begins at some stage to become undone by the very rivetedness of the attention lavished upon it. But what if the attention focused on the paintings one was working on produced a similar effect? Knowing that Bonnard worked from memory rather than in front of the motif, the object of his attention would obviously have been the painting *in media res*. And since "the execution takes place with the nose to the canvas or the paper", surely, after a while he needed to turn away from the marks he had laid down, lest they began to disintegrate in front of his eyes from being looked at so intensely and at such proximity. Hence, perhaps, one of the reasons for the frequent breaks or intervals that punctuated his working sessions, and consequently the extended periods of time he spent on a painting. Hence, too, the sense of a floating attention conveyed by Bonnard's paintings, a consequence perhaps of both his interest in peripheral vision and his intuition of the potentially destabilising effects of pictorial and perceptual fixedness, however much he might have been psychically fixated on certain motifs. (One remarks on his desire to grasp Marthe's elusive presence, however, fantasmatically.) Hence, finally, one's sense of the paintings as issuing from a state of dissolving concentration akin to reverie. The temporality of the daydream—at the antipodes of the "distraction" that Walter Benjamin saw as the dominant spectatorial regime of modernity in the era of high capitalism—is perhaps the closest approximation to the mode in which Bonnard's paintings sollicit the gaze of the beholder. Hospitable to the vagrant and the adventitious, the daydream or reverie is among the last available enclaves of freedom within the increasingly regimented and disciplinary forms of attentiveness accompanying that "pervasion of reality by the apparatus" so acutely and premonitorily analysed by Benjamin.[5]

"The vision of distant things is a flat vision," Bonnard observed. "It is the near planes which give the idea of the universe as the eye sees it."[6] The physical nearness of the painter to his painting as he worked on it was also, in a larger sense, a way of being within imaginative reach of the universe that he had created for himself, notwithstanding its being already in the past. "It's not a matter of painting life. It's a matter of giving life to painting", he noted in 1946, shortly before his death. Potentially, there was no end to the enlivenings that the painting might undergo. There couldn't really be a finality where freshness of the work—the vividness of the memory—was of the essence. Hence his habit of setting aside pictures, deferring their termination. As Charles Terrasse recalled, "He would customarily put aside a picture when it was nearly finished. After weeks or months, he would take it up again, seeing it with a fresh eye, finding a definite solution, modifying, accentuating."[7] Where Matisse at some point resorted to having the

5. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, London, ed. Hannah Arendt, Fontana, 1982, p. 252, note 20. For a rich discussion of this and related topics, see Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, An October Book, The Mit Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, England, 2001.

6. Quoted by Charles Terrasse, 1927, p. 163.

7. Charles Terrasse, quoted in Antoine Terrasse, 2000, p. 14.

successive stages of a work-in-progress photographed, Bonnard chose to stay with the image that was retained in his mind's eye. But his desire to preserve the "first idea" or "seduction" finds an echo in Matisse's conception of a painting as being finished when he rejoined the first emotion that sparked it.[8]

Bonnard's habit of retouching his paintings, sometimes long after they had left his studio and no longer in his possession, has often been treated as his particular idiosyncrasy, as something almost pranksterish. (There are anecdotes of him, paintbox in hand, surreptitiously stealing up to one of his paintings hanging in a museum and retouching it.) What tends to be overlooked is the affective ties that bound the painter to his paintings, the desire to prolong the contact (and not only visually, as we have gathered by now) with an image that had been so familiar to him and was the object of such psychic investment. This is not, strictly speaking, a question of repainting, as in the corrections, radical or minor, that painters have always resorted to, often leaving the traces of these ammendations or effacements—a very modern conceit—on the picture surface: traces that go by the beautiful name of *pentimenti*. Or more direly (in French) as *repentir*, the trace as a repentance. Nor is this a question of unfinish, as in the area held in "reserve", a section of the canvas left as is—another modern feint—that functions, variously, as a sign of spontaneity or informality or as an assertion of the material nature of the support. Bonnard's artifice was of another order; his paintings—like Nature—have a horror of the void.

"Recognise and use the unexpected quirks of matter during the execution," he tells himself in 1936. "Technique corresponds to necessary artifice, the requirements of nature causing a limitation." And since in his later years, it was light itself that was the final ravishment of his art, all manner of ruse was brought into play in the evocation of that most imperiously mutable of elements. As he noted late in life, "There is a formula which fits painting perfectly: many little lies to create a great truth". The visionary quality in late Bonnard was the result of innumerable re-visions.

The pictures increasingly came to be worked upon for extended periods of time. *Nude in the Bath and Small Dog* (cat. 76), the last in the great sequence of paintings on this theme, was begun in 1941, a year before Marthe died, and finished five years later, when she was no longer of this world. There is something otherworldly in the picture's iridescence, as if the tiles on the wall behind the *gisante* in her watery bed had been stained by the last flares of a drowning sun. During the five years that were spent on it, this was a "work-in-progress": the subject it consecrated was already posthumous, but the picture had to be forever alive.[9]

The nearness to the image that is a consistent formal trope of Bonnard's art also bespoke an emblematic intimacy, a fusional élan with the act of painting itself, of which the touch, the brushstroke, was the exemplary sign. This was the final mutation of the *intimiste* painter that Bonnard was at the beginning of his career. It seems fitting that it should have come to an end with an evocation of the onset of spring in his very last painting, the exquisite *Almond Tree in Blossom* of 1946-1947 (cat. 89), completed a few weeks before his death. The tremulous white blossoms suspended on the branches were a last testament to the painter's touch—literally, in the traces left by his fingers, an affirmation of sentience if ever there was one. As Charles Terrasse recalled, "The almond tree went through the same cycles as his other works: Bonnard set it aside, then retouched it, and finally signed it. However, he still pondered and contemplated it. Finally in January 1947, when his strength had left him, he said: 'The green on that bit of ground on the bottom on the left is not as it should be. It needs yellow…' He asked me to help him paint the area over in yellow, that is to say, gold..."[10]

The gold retouched the ground on which Bonnard had signed his name.

8. Henri Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, presented by Dominique Fourcade, Paris, Hermann, 1972, p. 48, note 13.

9. This is perhaps the moment to note a rather different sense that the word "execution" acquires in two recent texts on Bonnard: In his description of *Nude in the Bath and Small Dog* (1941-1946), John Elderfield writes "The curtain at the left (if that is what it is) is also dryly painted, but seems to have been stabbed at in a way that seems done nervously, and is nervous-making." (John Elderfield, "Seeing Bonnard" in Bonnard, Tate Gallery Publishing, London, 1998, p. 41.) This proto-Hitchcockian scenario (Bonnard as Norman Bates!) can be contrasted, rather more dramatically, with what Linda Nochlin has to say in her review of the exhibition held at the Tate Gallery: " I deeply admire, indeed at times, am passionately seduced by the pictorial rhetoric of Bonnard's Bathers; yet, at the same time, and with equal intensity I am also so repelled by the melting of flesh-and-blood model into the molten object of desire of the male painter that I want to plunge a knife into the delectable body-surface and shout: 'Wake up! Get out of the water and dry off! Throw him into the bathtub!'." (Linda Nochlin, "Bonnard's Bathers", *Art in America*, July 1998, p. 105).

10. Charles Terrasse, *Revue du Louvre et des musées de France*, *loc. cit.*, p. 144.

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PIERRE'S STUPEFACTION

The window of photography

Michel Frizot

There is no doubt that Bonnard was a painter. But he was never a "photographer", and referring to him as "Bonnard the photographer",[1] on the pretext of seeking to highlight this minor—albeit previously neglected—aspect of his artistic output by any specific study is a preconceived idea that misrepresents the situation. Distinguishing between "being a photographer", "doing photography" and "taking photos" involves subtle nuances, as well as inherent questions about profession, vocation and intent with respect to photography—a field already enmeshed in other image-driven artistic fields like painting and drawing. The study of Bonnard's photographs is a recent one, dating to the 1980s, with the discovery of over two hundred images taken by the artist.[2] At the time, photography was becoming a historic medium worthy of consideration and a medium favoured by contemporary art. The discovery occurred just as the photographic activity by painters—Munch, Eakins, Degas, Lartigue, Mucha, Vuillard, Breitner and others—was coming to light; and this activity was supposed to be seen as a sign of modernity.[3]

Photography (and this is a much-needed reminder) is above all and by definition a technique and a practice. Taking photographs (because Bonnard "took photographs") involves launching a physicochemical process by which light imprints a photosensitive surface, leaving traces of its impact. It also involves possessing the instrument which permits this process to occur, as well as mastering the various steps required in using it, as limited as they may be.

1. Jean-François Chevrier, "Bonnard photographe" in Paris, Washington, Dallas, 1984, pp. 219-239 (French edition); Françoise Heilbrun and Philippe Néagu, 1987; *Bonnard, Degas, Vuillard, photographes*, exh. cat., Paris, Galerie Jeanne-Bucher and Cercle d'art, 2003.

2. Heilbrun and Néagu, *op. cit.*: there are seventy-four negatives without prints, thirty negatives with prints, sixty-nine contact shots without negatives. Family tradition holds that many photographs were believed to have been lost whenever someone moved house.

3. One of the highlights was the exhibition "Malerei und Photographie im Dialog von 1840 bis Heute", at the Zurich Kunsthaus, catalogue by Erika Billeter, Bern, Benteli Verlag, 1977.

A HAND-HELD BLACK BOX

By the time Bonnard took up photography (both materially and mentally)—most likely in 1897—snapshots had become the standard models for picture-takers. Bonnard could therefore acquire a less expensive model that could be operated without any particular preliminary skills required—a portable camera called a "hand-held camera". This was the Pocket Kodak, produced by the Eastman Company in the United States in 1895. Bonnard definitely used a slightly updated model, dating from 1896. The artist frequently took photographs with his friend Vuillard, who also used the Kodak brand, although the latter was a much more driven photographer (Vuillard left over two thousand photographs).[4] These simplified snapshot cameras were all the rage at the time, particularly after the first Kodak camera was placed on the market in 1888. The 1895 Pocket Kodak was an industrial and commercial move to capture the market potential of amateur picture-takers who knew nothing about photography and didn't need to know either: "You press the button—we do the rest". Over 100,000 cameras were sold in 1895. The camera was small enough to be held in one hand (unlike its predecessor, the Kodak), as advertising campaigns attest, and it cost five dollars (five times less than the Kodak).

4. Vuillard used a different camera, the No. 2 Bullet Kodak, with film, producing 3.5 x 3.5 in. negatives (approximately 8 x 8 cm). You can see him holding one, notably in several photographs taken by Bonnard.

Fig. 1 Pocket Kodak, from *Catalogue Photographie, société nationale de produits chimiques*, ca. 1898.

The camera used flexible roll film and was a daylight-loading model, meaning that the photographer could now reload the camera without using a darkroom (a striking innovation and a great convenience). It allowed for twelve shots (fig. 1). The camera was a parallelepiped black box with a fixed-focus lens, with options for either a long exposure or a snapshot (single speed), and no other adjustments. The shutter release was operated by rotating a pivoting strip on the top of the camera. The most innovative feature was the ultra-small negative produced: 1 1/2 x 2 inches, or 3.8 x 5.1 centimetres.[5]

Regardless of whether or not Bonnard actively sought out this camera or was fully aware or totally oblivious to its various options, he had no choice but to rely on the available features—and was thus dependent not only on the efficiency it offered but also on the inherent limitations of its mechanical design. The user had to conform to technical constraints, regardless of individual skill or desires to "proceed with a shot" in a given way; otherwise, his attempts at photography overall would be failures (fig. 2). Bonnard found himself pinned in by the possibilities offered by the camera, by an interactive system of adjustments and regulations (light, exposure time, photosensitivity). Despite these constraints, however, the artist derived great satisfaction from the instant snapshot, which captured everything occurring in a given spatial field on a sensitive surface. The various options for taking aim—the means to appreciating the limits of this spatial field—represented a constant stumbling block: there was only a small rectangular viewfinder, barely two centimetres wide, on the upper side of the box (fig. 3). Photographers took aim—if that term is not too excessive—by holding the camera at stomach level and attempting to make out what appeared in the middle of the viewfinder, usually dim and with extremely blurred corners.[6] The operation required a judgement call—a far cry from the ultra-precision centring offered by modern viewfinders today. The operator had to continuously glance back and forth between the subject being shot and the blurred measure in the viewfinder.

To raise a pertinent notion, it is no longer acceptable today to view images as being independent of the specific constraints of each camera and each approach: all photographs reveal visible clues as to the options and constraints of the photographic process and the black box. The Pocket Kodak offered Bonnard, as it did all other picture-takers of the period, an entire host of possibilities, unanticipated effects and unpredictable aspects with disconcerting facility (pressing a button). Taking photographs under these circumstances involved just this: you entered a world in which there was no common measure between the banal act of producing an image and the thrill of renewed discovery that each image produced.

5. "Beginning in 1907-1908, Bonnard began using a new camera" (Heilbrun and Néagu, *op. cit.*, p. 110), the negatives of which were in 5.5 x 8 cm format (2 1/4 x 3 1/4 in.). This was probably the No. 1 Folding Pocket Kodak Camera dating from 1897, which was updated several times in 1905 and 1907 (reversible viewfinder). Bonnard's use of this folding model of the Pocket Kodak demonstrates his fondness for the initial Pocket model and the way it operated.

6. The single viewfinder imposed horizontal photographs, which is the case for catalogue numbers 1 to 211 by Heilbrun and Néagu, *op. cit.* (except for cat. 148 and 171, in 11 x 8 cm format, most likely taken with another camera and by someone else). Bonnard only took vertical shots with his second camera (see previous note), which, based on the model, had either two viewfinders or a double position viewfinder.

A NEW IMAGERY

Ever since Baudelaire's unfortunate adage that photography was the "servant of the arts, the ever so humble servant", there has been too much harping on this, and the mechanical sub-art of photography has been systematically relegated to the hierarchical servitude of the major arts—without actually admitting that photography contributed to rendering all hierarchies obsolete. But if photography, at various

Fig. 2 Pocket Kodak, 1896 model, for aiming and shooting, seen from the front. Musée Nicéphore Niépce/Cédric de Veigy.

Fig. 3 Pocket Kodak, 1896 model, seen from above, with the viewfinder. Musée Nicéphore Niépce/Cédric de Veigy.

steps and using different procedural formulas, has fascinated a great number of artists, it is because it operates in and with discrepancies and differences, offering the viewer a glimpse of images never before seen. Each individual artist then seizes on this and adapts his own individual pictorial approach to what photography reveals. To a certain extent, the attempts to retrospectively reintroduce photography into a creative process prevented a full appreciation of the differences that set photography apart as an original and specific iconic field.

Keeping in mind the craze among picture-takers of the 1890s for these new images, and the various events leading up to this craze, we can reconstitute Bonnard's astonishment upon seeing these small surfaces only a few square centimetres large, on which so many things can be seen. The first fissure, for someone who was as mad about colour as Bonnard, was definitely the monochromatic aspect of photographs, which at the time were not "black and white" but warm tones of sepia, chocolate, reddish or purplish brown (albumen paper or citrate paper). Achromatic would be more apt a term than monochromatic, as the photographic image revealed no particular colour; there was no chromatism, and no information was conveyed about the colours which the eye would normally detect when viewing the same subject. Both the principle and the effect were unsettling (as they were for the inventors of photography), even more so for painters. From the very launch of photography as a medium, the advantages were clear: an exceptional ability to capture the various grades of tones, as the process is based solely on the amounts of light; and an unrivalled precision of the most ordinary detail. Bonnard was not very receptive to these benefits, yet remained confident in the intricately entwined light-colour relationship: colour was light and light sprang solely from colour. "When we cover a given surface with colours, we must be able to constantly renew the interplay, finding new combinations of forms and colours that meet the demands of emotion." (Bonnard, note in his diary, dated 1945.) Photographs were merely propositions of form and light; they gave free rein to the "interplay" of colour, combinations, emotion and the coloured reconstitution on which Bonnard imposed no standard model on himself. This was the sheer beauty of being a colourist.

The second remarkable distinction of a Pocket Kodak photograph was its extremely small size: 3.8 x 5.1 centimetres (the Pocket Kodak was the first common camera with such a small format).[7] It was similar in size to a postage stamp, yet was not a miniature designed as a detailed microcosm, but a selective one. Upon this surface, which fit into the palm of the hand or on the fingertips, was concentrated an entire world of characters, plants, furniture and accessories, providing exquisite details of fabric textures, of foliage that almost seemed to quiver, and of well-lit and matt features similar to those seen by the naked eye. There were also smooth nude bodies, shapely curves, hairiness and faces with familiar expressions, with spiteful or anxious looks in their eyes. The vastness of this world that entered the black box and indelibly stamped itself on such a tiny surface could not but have amazed Bonnard, just as it delighted picture-takers at the time. Most certainly unwittingly, he opted for a camera with a very wide angular field (much wider than its forerunner the Kodak). It was so wide that even in close-up shots or shots taken at ground level, he could include several characters, as well as the sur-

7. This proves that dating Bonnard's first photograph to 1891 is incorrect (Heilbrun and Néagu, *op.cit.*, cat. 1, p. 112), which would make it the only one from this period, the others being dated to 1897 at the earliest. The strict dimensions, referring to the Pocket Kodak—the only camera producing this format—makes this highly unlikely prior to 1895.

roundings of the scene—views of children in the water, for example (fig. 4). The rapidity of capturing images was the third major disparity that set photography apart for Bonnard. This did not involve instantaneous acrobatics of amazing shutter speeds or experiments with the infinitesimal instant. Bonnard's camera offered only two options: long exposure (which he didn't seem to use at all) and snapshot, approximately one-thirtieth of a second, somewhat lacking for very dynamic subjects, which came out blurry as a result of their motion (Marthe's facial shots, among others). The rapidity here involved the immediacy of the process, the spontaneous casting of elements onto a given surface, the disconcerting principle of inscribing all positions, forms, textures, shadows of a given spatial field, with the sheer exactness of their positioning and shortened perspective, in the blink of an eye. For a painter or draughtsman facing the daily toil of the image and a man struggling with his own visual acuity, the ability to do just this was like a wager. It distorted things to a certain extent, giving you "visions" of what you couldn't in fact see with the eye (fig. 5). We may have forgotten this a long time ago, given our familiarity with the photographic process, but Bonnard experienced it for himself for the first time—with an instrument he could easily operate alone—as an experience that went beyond "making" images, as a triumph of iconic treatment, as astonishment over unsuspected presences awaiting discovery, as a risk to take.

Fig. 4 Swimming, 1903-1905.

Fig. 5 A dog and children in the background, 1898-1899.

BEYOND THE RANGE OF THE EYE

Bonnard's experiments with photography, carried out over a twenty-year period (until at least 1916) and of a scope we still cannot properly evaluate, were certainly not without impact on his pictorial approach, but neither did they feed the actual source of his artistic output. Of those comparisons possible between the photographs known today and Bonnard's oeuvre, only two series of nude pictures of Marthe, in their Paris flat (1899-1900, cat. P1 to P9)[8] and in the Montval gardens (1900-1901, cat. P10 to P28),[9] reveal a similarity of position, namely with the lithographs illustrating Verlaine's *Parallèlement* (first series) and *Daphnis et Chloé* (second series). One could argue that the latter, in which Bonnard also appears nude (Marthe took the shots), represents a series of studies of imaginary bath scenes, variations on the basic gestures used in taking care of the body: the tilt of the head when paying great attention to one's own movements—rubbing and drying oneself off—the precariousness of keeping one's balance, etc. The ability to study these facets of bodies in motion, in real time with respect to movement, is one contribution of instant photography and underscores the frozen artificiality of the fixed position of the model. The gestures captured in photographs are not fictitious; they convey intimate positions, even more glaring in their nudity, awkwardness and innocence. The first series (Marthe on a bed) probably inspired several paintings, without any literal copy having been produced. There is the same natural casualness of the body, spontaneity, the same instinctive leaning positions, the instability of a given pose, an occasional awkwardness that takes the viewer way beyond the classical themes of Olympia or Venus. One could wager that Bonnard used photographic images to invent positions for legs and arms, for the carriage of busts which he would never

8. Heilbrun and Néagu, *op. cit.*, cat. 108 to 117.
9. *Ibid.*, cat. 118 to 139.

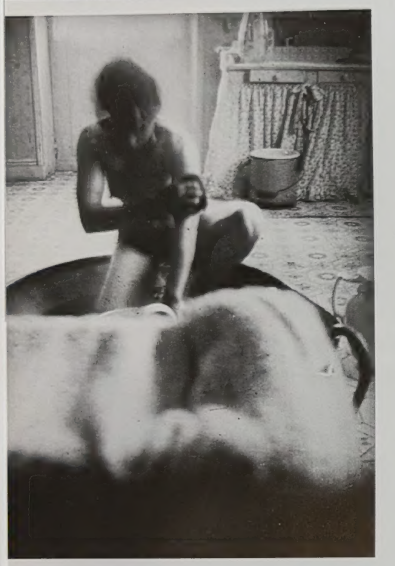


Fig. 6 (cat. P7) Marthe lying on her back, 1899-1900.

Fig. 7 (cat. P21) Marthe seen in profile, about to sit down, 1900-1901.

Fig. 8 (cat. P29) Marthe in the tub, ca. 1908-1910 (7.8 x 5.5 cm, with the No. 1 Folding Pocket Kodak).

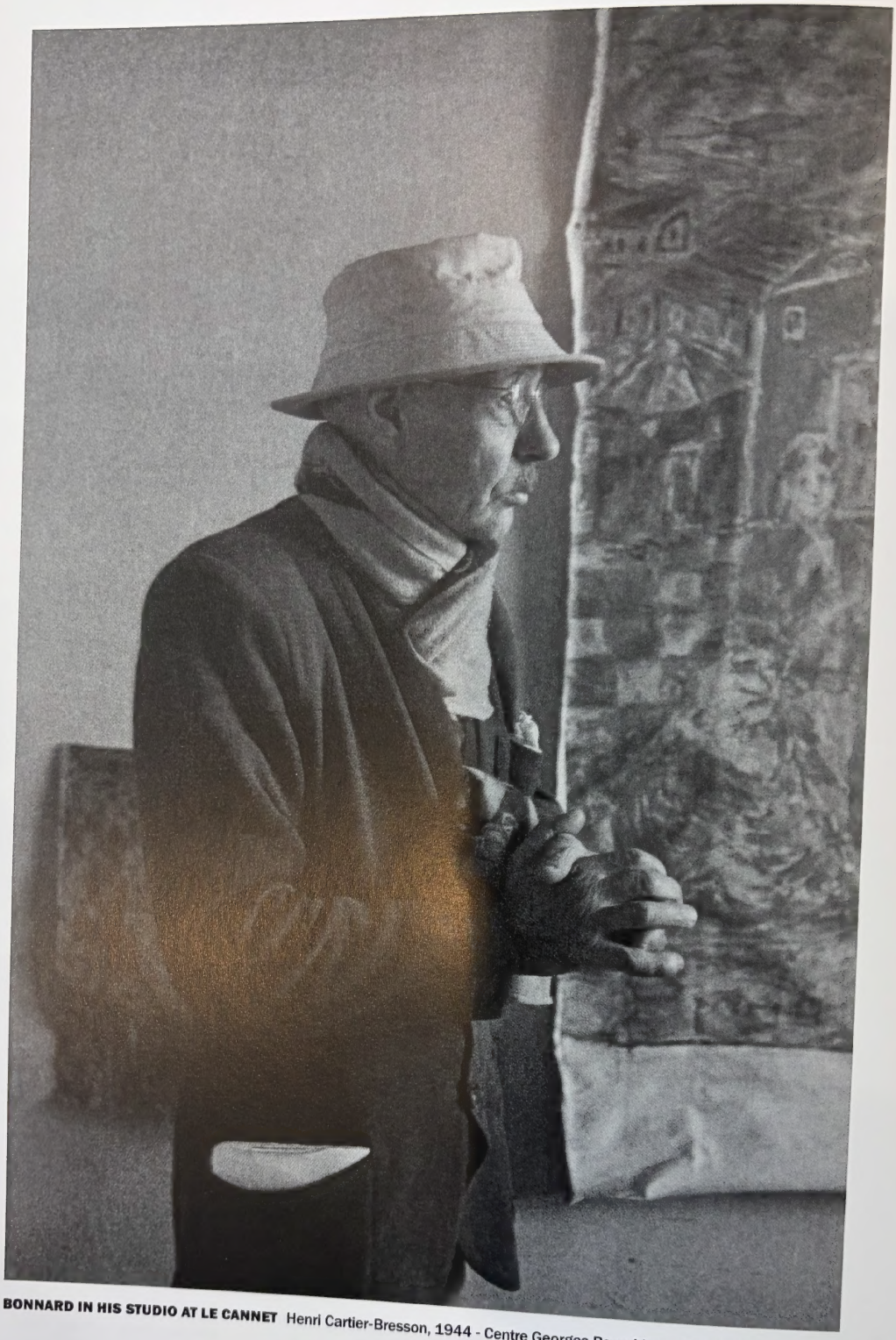
have dared attempt without this indissoluble attestation of truth—*Indolence*, 1899 (cat. 17) and *Siesta*, 1900 (cat. 18) (fig. 6 and 7). In addition (and this is no lesser a contribution of photography), there is the spectator's "point of view", which he would not have found without operating the camera as a go-between (the lens as the viewer's eye). The camera acts as the eye that "sees" from 1 to 1.10 metres from above, at maximum.

The same considerations later apply to the paintings *Nude in the Tub* and *Nude at Her Toilette* (1913 to 1924), which could have drawn on the photograph *Marthe in the Tub* (ca. 1908-1910, cat. P29). This was perhaps the only photo retained from the series, yet it was sufficient to describe the fertile advances and changes that Bonnard could perceive in it: a foreground looming in appearance, incredibly blurred (but the painter liked this blurred effect and the depth it created, and frequently used both in his paintings), the vast surface area of the room with the vanishing lines of the floor, and above all the naked crouching woman, washing her left arm with her right hand. Such positions, with the foreshortening of the bent leg, can be imagined only in a photograph, and they are efficiently conveyed in this three-centimetre figure (fig. 8). From all evidence, Bonnard did not copy photographs; he didn't need to. He calls attention to the apparent impertinence of certain poses seen in the photographs; they are neither poses in the strict sense of photographic exposures nor poses in terms of the model who is posing. These positions don't last; they are photographic because they are temporary and fleeting. The astonishment that a highly attentive painter discovers in the insignificance of photographs nourished an entire mental repertory of memories and potential representations..

PHOTOGRAPHIC INSOLENCE

Bonnard's diary notes contain a definition that could seem somewhat elliptic: "painting or the transcription of adventures of the optic nerve" (1 February 1934). This described the reality of painting in quasi-scientific terms—a transcription on a surface of sensations that the "vision" of a given field of space yields—which Bonnard initially analysed as the "adventures" conveyed by the optic nerve, transmitter of signals from the eye to the brain. Bonnard thus no longer aligned painting with Cartesian ocular vision, but with an "adventurous" mental consciousness that was precarious, unstable and oblivious to sensations construed as objective. These sensations were merely transmissions of the influx produced on the retina by luminous impacts of diverse wavelengths (which we call colours).

During one period, sometime around 1900, Bonnard saw photography as an entry into the exercise of a renewed profession. After all, the Nabi movement of earlier years was constructed around minor, circumstantial practices such as the flat tints of Japanese prints or lithographs, and the shadowy ring of wood engravings. The tiny black box's photographic system offered an extension of the visual field, which Bonnard applied in broad terms by imposing an "*hors-champ*" within the canvas's surface: doors, windows, table or floor in the first plane give the impression of a curved spherical space seen in "wide angle". The painting is not a centred image, but the extensible recipient of what sensation, memory and the eyes' movement



BONNARD IN HIS STUDIO AT LE CANNET Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1944 - Centre Georges Pompidou – MNAM/CCI, Paris